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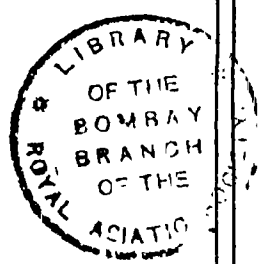
PAMELA POUNCE

A TALE OF
TEMPESTUOUS PETTICOATS

BY

AGNES & EGERTON CASTLE

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON LTD.
TORONTO LONDON NEW YORK
ST. PAUL'S HOUSE WARWICK SQUARE E.C.4


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CONTENTS

PAGE

PREFACE - - - - - - - - - ix

PROLOGUE - - - - - - - - - xiii

CHAPTER I

HOW MY LADY KILCRONEY ENTERED INTO ROYAL SERVICE UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE ITALIAN HAT TRIMMED BY MISS PAMELA POUNCE - - 17

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH MISS PAMELA POUNCE IS ORDERED TO PACK - - - - - - - - - 47

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH MISS PAMELA POUNCE, THE MILLINER'S ASSISTANT, BECOMES ARBITER OF LIFE AND DEATH IN HIGH SOCIETY - - - - - 58

CHAPTER IV

SHOWING STORM WITHIN AND WITHOUT - - 79

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH MISS PAMELA POUNCE DEMONSTRATES THE VALUE OF VIRTUE TO HER FAMILY AND HER FRIENDS - - - - - - - - 106

PAGE

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH MY LADY KILCRONEY STRIKES A MATCH AND MISS POUNCE THROWS COLD WATER ON IT - - - - - - - - - - 131

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH IS MANIFEST THE HAND OF THE SAINTED JULIA - - - - - - - - - 152

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH A WONDERFUL BIT OF LUCK COMES OUT OF MISS POUNCE'S BANDBOX FOR SOMEBODY ELSE - - - - - - - - 162

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH MISS PAMELA POUNCE HAS DONE WITH LOVE - - - - - - - - - 187

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH MISS PAMELA POUNCE SETS THREE BLACK FEATHERS FOR TRAGEDY - - - 202

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH THERE IS A PRODIGIOUS SCANDAL ABOUT PINK FLOUNCES - - - - - - - 227

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH MY LADY KILCRONEY INSISTS ON THE DUTY OF MORALITY - - - - - - 238

PAGE

CHAPTER XIII

In which my Lady Kilcroney makes an Indelicate Fuss - - - - - - - - 254

CHAPTER XIV

In which Kitty is more Incomparable than Ever - - - - - - - - - - 274

CHAPTER XV

In which the Mad Brat takes the Bit between her Teeth, but Miss Pamela Pounce Keeps Hold of the Reins - - - - - 85

CHAPTER XVI

In which my Lady Kilcroney has the Last Word - - - - - - - - - - 313

PREFACE

There can be no doubt that shedding her petticoats a woman has shed much, if not all, of her femininity, till she is now merely a person of an opposite sex. She is a female; for nothing will ever make her a man, but Woman (with a capital W), Woman with her charm, her elusiveness, her mystery, her reserves, her virginal withdrawals, her exquisite yieldings; she is that no longer.

How much of her queenship has she not given up with her petticoats?

At no time was Woman more thoroughly feminine, more absolutely mistress of her own fascinations and of the hearts of men, than in the eighteenth century; preferably the latter half.

That was a time when it may be said that no woman could look ugly; that beauty became irresistible. Take the period consecrated by the art of Sir Joshua Reynolds, and of Romney; take the picture of the Parson's Daughter, by the latter artist; that little face, so piquante, innocent, fresh, sly, mischievous, is nothing at all without its cloud of powdered curls but a very ordinary visage; almost common indeed! With its distinctive coiffure, framing, softening, etherealising, giving depth to the eyes and allurement to the smile; how irresistibly delicious! How irresistibly delicious, too, is the mode which exposes the young throat so modestly between the soft folds of the muslin kerchief.

Youth then, even without much beauty, is served to perfection by the taste of the period. What of beauty itself? Look at the portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire, by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the famous one with the

big hat, where she is holding the dancing baby. There is an answer more eloquent than any words can give.

And, rarest thing in a fashion! it became age as completely. Even elderliness emerged triumphant. I vow that Mrs. Hardcastle, Mrs. Malaprop, Mrs. Primrose are delightful figures of buxomness on any stage. Their double chins assúme a pleasant sort of dignity, overshadowed by the curls and loops of their tremendous coiffures. The dress with its panniers, its apron, its general amplitude is peculiarly advantageous to the too, too solid flesh of the matron.

The mode of the moment has a singular effect on the morals of the moment. Our emotions are more moulded and coloured by our clothes than we are aware.

It is quite certain that when a young lady went panniered and patched, fichued and ruffled, powdered and rouged, tripping on high heels, ready for the minuet, her feelings went delicately with her, metaphorically garbed in daintiness to match.

And, when a gentleman of fashion was a Beau; when his fine leg showed to its utmost in a silk stocking; when his pampered hand was as elegant of gesture with a pinch of snuff between falling ruffles as it was in whipping out a small sword, he retained his masculine virility none the less; but like the blade of that same small sword, was cutting, polished, deadly, vicious even, all within the measure of courtesy and refinement.

The world has mightily changed since the days when hearts beat under the folds of the fichu or against the exquisite embroideries of the waistcoat. Sad divagations then, as now, were taken out of the path of rectitude, but they were taken with a rustle of protesting petticoats, to the gallant accompaniment of buckled shoes or, more romantic still, dashing top boots.

A tale of 1788 is necessarily a tale of petticoats.

> "A winning wave, deserving note
> Of a tempestuous petticoat,"

cries the poet of an earlier age. Femininity must needs

rustle and whisper, and curtsy and flounce through every chapter.

The collaborator whose name appears for the last time on this title page, turned to the century of The Bath Comedy and the subsequent and connected chronicles as a kind of relaxation of the mind from what he most hated: the ugliness of modern life. The realism which sets itself to describe the material, the grosser aspect of any emotion, the brutality that miscalls itself strength; that forcing of the note of horror—which is no more power than the beating of a tin can or the shrieking of a syren is music—were abhorrent to him. He liked the pretty period in spite of its artificialities; he liked the whole glamour of the time; he liked its reticence and its gaiety, its politeness, its wit, and its naughtiness and its quaintness, because, as in an artistic bout of fencing, it was all bounded by a certain measure of grace and rule.

The laughter he gave to these conceptions came, as true laughter must, from a most innocent and wholesome heart. It is this laughter which is his last legacy to a sad, tangled, and rather ugly world.

AGNES EGERTON CASTLE.

PROLOGUE

"*No man is hero to his valet*"; so runs the cynical adage. But you can reverse the saying with reference to the other sex. *Every woman is a heroine to her lady's maid;* it may not be true in all cases, but 'tis true enough for any proverb.

The romance of a lady's own woman is centred in her mistress. She will clothe her in finery with a greater joy than if she were draping herself; rather than see her go shabby she would wear sackcloth; she will hang over the banisters, on a dinner-party night, to observe the sit of her train as she sweeps downstairs on the arm of some notable personage; she will lean out of the window to watch her step into her sedan, and if there are Beaux hovering and my Lady tosses her plumes and whisks her panniers to proper advantage it is Abigail's heart that beats high with pride.

Even Miss Lydia Pounce, own woman to my Lady Kilcroney, a damsel remarkable from her earliest youth for her tart and contradictious ways, who was verging on elderliness now with the acidity and leanness peculiar to the "born old maid," would have laid down her life to ensure that my Lady's court gown should fit her trim waist without a wrinkle, or that the pink silk stocking that clothed her pretty leg was drawn to its proper skin-tight limit.

(Both the Incomparable Kitty and her Lydia were exceedingly particular that these same stockings should never be worn with the gross slovenliness that permitted a sag. Not indeed that anything but the merest glimpse of slender, arched feet, like the "little mice" of an earlier poet's fancy, peeping in and out from under the

flutter and foam of lace and silken flounce, was ever displayed to the vulgar eye; but to know these niceties complete in the smallest and most delicate detail was necessary to the comfort of any self-respecting Woman. And on this point Lydia was in thorough sympathy with her mistress, as upon all others connected with the elegance and *bon ton* of the most modish of Mayfair belles; of that leader of Fashion, Feeling and Style which the Lady Kilcroney undoubtedly was.)

If Woman be a heroine to her lady's maid, in what light does she appear to her Milliner?

Here we come upon debatable ground. At first sight it would seem that the milliner, being dependent upon her customers for her very existence, it must follow that whatever her private opinion may be with regard to their appearance and taste, she can have but one burning desire: to please her patronesses. There is nevertheless another side to the question.

What Woman of intelligence but does not realise that a Mode may make or mar her? How much may hang on the droop of a feather; the tilt of a hat-brim; the glow of a rose in cunning juxtaposition with the soft carmine of a blushing cheek? Blue eyes may flash into sudden significance under a knot of azure ribbon, that had before languished their tenderest in vain. Saucy innocence may triumph beneath a shepherdess wreath; or tired charms kindle into new brilliancy stimulated by the consciousness of the perfect inspiration. In fine, all that life holds best is at the mercy of the mantua maker where the Lady of Fashion is concerned. Let but a clever business woman grasp this great and awful truth; and she who combines the brain that can devise, the taste that never fails, the acumen that knows no hesitation, the finger that is at once light and firm, unerring and ethereal, becomes to her employers a treasure beyond the mines of Golconda!

Such a treasure did Miss Pamela Pounce, with whom these pages are concerned, prove herself to the noted

Madame Mirabel of Bond Street. And such an influence, far-reaching and subtle, did she exercise on the lives of the *Elégantes* who consulted her, with the eager submission and reverence of the believing Greek for his Oracles, though with far other and comfortably practical results!

Miss Pamela Pounce, Goddess of Modes, was *ipso facto* Goddess of the Machine of Life, deciding, with a lucky toss of ribbons or hitherto undreamt of combination of fallals, the fate of her fair customers, and incidentally that of their Beaux, their lovers and their husbands; my Lady Kilcroney and her lazy, jolly life-loving Lord; dark-browed Susan Verney, who would fain have bent the whole world to her sway as she did her weary Baron; Lady Anne, her sister, still fondly, foolishly in love with her stalwart, countrified Squire, Philip Day; their young sister, the last of the fair Vereker Ladies and the naughtiest, with her tangled love-stories; Mr. Stafford, the once famous Beau, proud of the startling beauty of his excellent, dull, childish wife, and anxious that she should flaunt it *à la mode* with the best of them; Sir Jasper Standish, the sporting Baronet, who, bereaved of his exquisite, clinging Julia, found himself entangled beyond belief with Miss Pamela Pounce's ribbons; the noted young actress, Miss Falcon, known as "Fair Fatality," whose brief life drama was more tragic than any she had enacted for the benefit of the public; the plain Miss Vibart, who found beauty and love and happiness all in a Pounce bandbox; Mistress Molly Lafone, own sister—who would believe it?—to the pearl of ingenuous womanhood, Prue Stafford, Molly Lafone that minx, whom the members of my Lady Kilcroney's coterie were so unanimously leagued to suppress and exclude, and who, in spite of their efforts contrived to insinuate herself disastrously into all their combinations (was it not under a wreath twisted by Pamela's long clever fingers that this elegant little adventuress came to her most deserved catastrophe?)—there was not one of them but came under her wand!

But at the same time the arbiter of the fate of others, in the shape of a very human young woman, guided the shuttle of her own destiny, and wove a remarkably pretty design for herself.

Milliners, unlike Oracles and Sybils, have each their personal human span with its joys and fears, pleasures, pains and triumphs. Pamela's romance ran like a cherry-coloured thread through the warp and woof of those other existences, so far above her, in which her profession had involved her. To show the whole pattern, light and dark, sparkling and deep-hued, flowered, dotted, arabesqued, of this brocade of earthly life, the poor *Modiste* must assume as important a place as that of her clientele.

CHAPTER I

How my Lady Kilcroney entered into Royal Service under the Shadow of the Italian Hat trimmed by Miss Pamela Pounce

While Miss Pamela Pounce was serving her third year as apprentice to the great art of Hat Confectionery, under the ægis of no less a personage than the world-famous Madame Eglantine of Paris—once "the little French Milliner" of Bath—her aunt and benefactress, who had placed her in these favourable circumstances, had begun to taste the proudest triumph of her life.

Miss Lydia Pounce was about to become own woman to a Court lady! My Lady Kilcroney—to whom she had so faithfully and ruthlessly devoted herself—from the days when, as the Widow Bellairs, she first scintillated in the world of fashion, to her present position of Viscountess—was chosen by Her Majesty, Queen Charlotte, to fill the post of Lady-in-Waiting to her own Sacred Person.

To enter Court circles had been the dream of Lydia's angular and ambitious breast. Her mistress's gratified vanity was a trifling emotion compared to the bursting satisfaction which this upward step on the social ladder afforded the maid. It is not too much to say that she regarded herself in the light of a Prime Minister who has successfully brought about some great political event, and who is a far more important person than the Sovereign whom he serves.

It came to pass in this wise.

His Most Gracious Majesty, King George III, had been ordered to Cheltenham Spa for the waters by his

physicians; his state of health was causing anxiety, the extent of which was as yet quite unknown to the bulk of his loyal subjects. Queen Charlotte, the most devoted of spouses, of course determined to accompany him; and the Royal party duly proceeded to the Spa.

It happened to be Lady Flora Dare Stamer's term of attendance on Her Majesty, and that stout estimable Lady-in-Waiting happened to be Lady Kilcroney's very close and dear friend. There was nothing remarkable, perhaps, in the conjunction of these two happenings; but it was indeed singular that Kitty Kilcroney should happen to discover a delicacy in her son and heir which necessitated an instant visit to the celebrated health resort now so vastly honoured.

These events having succeeded each other, nothing more natural than that my Lady Kilcroney should invite her "poor dear Flo" to a dish of tea and a chat at her lodgings, to rest her of the fatigue consequent upon her eminent but exhausting office.

Though Lady Flora had made no secret to her intimates of her intention to rid herself of her honours as soon as might be, who so surprised as her dearest Kitty to learn that she now believed her emancipation at hand?

"To tell you the truth, my dear," said Lady Flo, chewing a macaroon, "it's not a job that suits me in the least. 'Twould fit you vastly better."

"O, Lady Flo!" cried Kitty in accents of amazement. "What a strange thought! I vow and declare such an idea never crossed my mind. And, in truth, 'tis rank impossible. There are a hundred reasons, a thousand reasons, why I am the last person likely to be selected by Her Majesty. I am too young."

"Upon my word," said her companion bluntly. "I doubt if there's so much between us, my dear, were it not that I have run to fat. These macaroons are excellent. 'Tis like your genius to be so well served in lodgings.

You've brought the best of your staff with you, I make no doubt."

"And, O, my love! the difficulty of housing them! There's scarce a tradesman in the town that hath not a servant of mine."

Kitty spoke with the careless self-importance of the wealthy woman. And Lady Florence approved.

"How right of you, my love, to insist on Comfort!" Comfort was the first and last of her aspirations. "Aye, I will have a little more cream. This whipped stuff—I dare swear 'tis your idea to have it so lavishly flavoured with the vanilla; vastly delicate. Your chocolate is as incomparable as your agreeable self! But yours are not the years of giddiness. I speak in all friendship, I beg you to believe."

Kitty murmured in an absent voice, that she had married her first—worthy Bellairs—a mere child, practically out of the nursery.

"Anyhow, my sweet Kilcroney, no woman who has had two husbands can deny a certain amount of experience, and upon rep," with a rolling laugh, "I don't care who knows that I'm on the wrong side of thirty! You must be pretty well advanced on the right side of it?"

"If you can call twenty-eight——"

"Admit to twenty-eight, by all means!—nevertheless, 'tis an age of discretion. And Her Majesty——"

"I understand——" said Kitty, balancing her teaspoon on the rim of her handleless cup with a musing air—she wondered in her soul if the excellent Lady Flo could really be taken in by this pretence; if it were possible she did not guess that she, Kitty Kilcroney, was longing, grilling to step into her Court shoes—as if she cared who knew that she was over thirty her last birthday, and warming but to riper beauty as the months slipped by!

"'Tis not," she said aloud, with a pout, "that I would decline a post about our gracious Queen, if 'twere o

me, God forbid! I am too loyal a subject. But I understand the German woman, that frumpish creature, the Keeper of the Robes—what's her barbarous name?—hath the royal ear, and will not suffer anything young or comely, if she can help it, about Her Majesty—(And there's one for you, my Lady Flo, with your right and your wrong side of thirty!) 'Tis a vast of pity you will not continue to occupy a position so honourable and so becoming to you."

"To tell you the truth," said Lady Flora unmoved, helping herself to another macaroon, "'tis the standing that undoes your poor friend! Conceive it, my love, full fourteen stone, and on my feet hours every day. Hours did I say? Centuries. Look hither!" She thrust out a large sandalled foot, which certainly had a plethoric appearance. "'Tis swollen beyond belief. I acknowledge my stoutness. I made but little count of it, for I've been a prodigious comfortable woman along of it. 'Tis a cushioned life. It pads the mind as it were. I assure you, I believe myself to have been, only some three months ago, the most good-tempered woman in England. And now! 'Pon rep, I am growing peevish! Fie upon it—stout and peevish! Was there ever such a combination?"

As if to contradict her own statement she again gave way to her jolly laugh. Kitty, watching her through long eyelashes, sighed.

"But what can induce you to think of me, my Lady Flo? Poor little retiring me?"

"Pray my dear, do not play the Molly Lafone with me!"

Molly Lafone! Such a comparison was too comic! Kitty laughed, and dropped her not very successful mask.

"Upon my word, then, I believe it would suit me! But how can it be accomplished? I am not one to push myself forward. My Lord Kilcroney is an Irishman and no courtier, and their Majesties have their own favourites;

and indeed to begin with, I doubt whether you will find it so easy to resign."

"Resign, Kitty! Resign? No, dear Kilcroney, I am on the point of being graciously dismissed. It took some management, but I was desperate. Another month of this, I said, and Mr. Stamer will be able to look out for a new wife—which he would do, my dear love, across my very coffin—'twas yesterday sennight then, I made up my mind. I took my best rose-point flounce—by the mercy of heaven it was just returned from the lace-menders, neatly packed in tissue tied with ribbon and a scent bag within, as elegant a parcel as you could wish to see!—and I sought Mrs. Schwellenberg—aye, that same!—and says I, 'For mercy's sake, give me a chair. My poor feet will scarce support me?' At which she looks as sour as a crab, and quoth she: 'We all have veet, Lady Florence' (you know her vile accent), 'but we forget dem in our great honour and brivilege.' 'Would God I could forget mine,' thinks I. But she glances at the parcel in my hand: 'Take a zeat,' she says with a roll of her old eye. 'Ah, my good Frau,' says I to myself, 'you may look, but you shan't clutch yet a bit!'"

Lady Florence laughed reminiscently, and Kitty screamed:

"Never tell me you gave the old Dutch villain your rose point flounce!"

"And what would be the good of a rose-point flounce to me, when I should be dropped dead in the Queen's apartment, like any hackney jade? My love, I showed that ancient toad my two feet—and I vow toad is a good name for her, for she hath the countenance and the croak of her own pet frogs—I showed her my feet, and I lamented my stones of weight. 'Pon rep! I gave myself sixteen, I did indeed, and what with the swelling, I looked 'em! 'Let me confide in you,' I cries, 'if ever I saw a truly noble soul writ on a human brow, 'tis on yours! My frame,' I cries, 'is not equal to my devotion.

My ankles will not support the loyalty of my heart! 'tis not that I should grudge passing away in such service,' I cries, turning up my eyes—You could not have done it better, Kitty!—' but were I to faint in those sacred precincts, were I to pass away in that august Presence, Her Majesty would be justly annoyed. Dr. Jebb has warned me. Alas! look at me. Am I not fat?' 'Vat you are,' says she, 'but so am I.' Well, then, my love, I gave her a peep of the lace, and she began to dribble at the corners of her mouth, and I knew the trick was done! 'If I speak to Her Majesty,' says she, and she fingering my rose-point, 'I vonder vot substitute I could suggest. Her Majesty she does not like the changes, and——' And then, I thought of you, Kitty."

"I wonder why, in the name of Heaven!" cried this lady tartly.

"Your feet won't swell, my love."

"I need not accept," quoth Kitty, pinching her lips.

"Kitty, if you play your cards well, the post will be offered to you while their Majesties are here at Cheltenham. 'Tis all settled with the Schwellenberg. Do you not know," said Lady Florence, pushing the dish with a single remaining macaroon upon it, virtuously from her, "that Susan Verney is making all the interest in the world for the honour? But she was rude to the Schwellenberg one day—you know poor Susan's way!—when they met in my drawing-room at Queen's Lodge, and the Schwellenberg will have none of her!"

"Say no more!" cried Kitty, and fires shot from her eyes.

"My love, I believe I have served you," said Lady Florence, replying to the eloquence of that glance. "'My royals are not bartial to the Irish,' said Schwellenberg. 'Ah, but Madam,' I says. 'My Lady Kilcroney is not Irish. She is true-born English, and has vast wealth—widow of an Indian Nabob—vast wealth and a generous heart!—And you admire the lace, Madam?' says I,

' in the very truth I was hoping I might venture to offer it to you, for 'tis lace that should be worn at court, Madam, and in no other place—and as I mentioned to you, my Lady Kilcroney and her Lord have practically severed all ties with Ireland. If you would accept the flounce, Madam, on my retirement (I think there is a narrow edging of rose-point to match).' ' I will tink of what you say about my Lady Kilcroney,' croaks she. Am I not a good friend, Kitty ? "

She looked at Kitty with such beaming kindness that all this latter's caprices vanished ; she cast herself affectionately on Lady Florence's huge bosom and voted that she was indeed the best and dearest !

It was agreed between them before the large and jovial lady left the pleasant apartments overlooking the meadows, that she would call early next morning, and report the result of Mrs Schwellenberg's " tinking," since she had been given to understand that Her Majesty would deliver her gracious dismissal that evening, during the process of the Royal disrobing.

" You must hold yourself ready, my sweet child, to be at any point considered suitable along Her Majesty's path during the next few days. By the looks Her Majesty casts on me I am convinced Schwellenberg has kept her word, and prepared the ground 'ere we left Queen's Lodge. Well, she knew she would not get the rose-point otherwise."

Kitty stood reflecting in the bow-window long after Lady Florence's chairmen had reeled away with their burden towards Lord Fauconberg's small house on the hill, which had been placed at their Majesties' disposal. It could not be said that she had quite so altogether consuming a desire for the post of Lady-in-Waiting since hearing Lady Florence's talk and gazing on those swollen feet, but, rather than that Susan Verney—dark, overbearing Susan !—should have the advantage, Kitty would have stood on burning ploughshares. She had, thank

Heaven, as good health as any lady in the kingdom, a back that was never tired, and a fund of humour and good humour that made her equal to most trials. Moreover she had a fighting spirit, and, she flattered herself, a charm of her own. If she did not get the better of Schwellenberg on the one hand, and ingratiate herself with Royalty on the other, then she was no longer Incomparable Bellairs!

Her agreeable reflections were broken in upon by the entrance of my Lord Kilcroney.

Now, hot-blooded, red-headed Irishman as he was, it was the rarest thing in the world for this nobleman to be seriously out of temper with anyone, let alone with the wife of his bosom; but, as he flung himself into Kitty's hired parlour, he was in as irate a mood as he had ever indulged in, and that with his Lady.

"Here's a pretty business!" quoth he, and cast his hat on the table in the middle of the room, very nearly dislodging the glass dome which protected a gold filigree basket containing the most purple plums, the reddest strawberries, the bluest grapes that ever artist in wax produced. "Here's a pretty to-do!" cried Denis Kilcroney.

"There seems indeed to be a to-do!" retorted Kitty. She wheeled round from the window. "But you will condescend to explain the cause perhaps, my Lord?"

"So I hear you've got a place about the court, me darling," said Denis, plunging into sarcasm, with a flushed countenance. "'Pon me soul, 'tis the grand lady you're going to be entirely! 'Tis the back seat your husband will have to be taking. Glory be to God, what's a husband? And an Irish one into the bargain!"

"Pray, my Lord," cried Kitty, all eagerness. "Where have you heard the news? For, as I'm a living woman, 'tis news to me."

"Ah! go on out of that." My Lord was certainly very

angry, and more than usually Hibernian. "Didn't that fat baggage come straight out of these doors? Didn't she put that full moon face of hers out of the sedan window and bawl to her men to stop, and them with the sweat dripping off them, God help them! And 'oh,' she calls, 'My Lord Kilcroney,' she cries, ''tis quite settled,' she says. 'And your Kitty to take my post about Her Majesty.' Why, all Cheltenham could have heard her."

"Tush!". Kitty's peach-tinted countenance, agog with delight, fell. "Is that all? Why——" she was about to expound to Denis with some firmness the folly of giving way to passion over an event that was still in the uncertain future, at the same time conveying to him her clear intention to leave no stone unturned towards its accomplishment, when her little black page appeared at the open door, grinning at the sounds of dispute, and announced: "Mistress Lafone." And if the sight of dusky innocence amused was exasperating to my Lady, what can be said of the feelings aroused by the smile of minxish artfulness?

"Good heavens," cried Kitty. "And what brings you to Cheltenham, if one may ask?"

"Good-morrow, my sweet Kilcroney."

This familiarity!

"Good-morrow, Madam." Kitty swept a curtsy to mark her distance, the while my Lord kissed the creature's hand, positively as if he liked doing so, and him but out of such a tantrum as never was.

"And what should bring me to Cheltenham—(no, my Lord, pray. I prefer the little stool. I do indeed) —why should not poor little me be here with the rest?"

"Why, indeed?" growled Kilcroney.

"And what has brought you, my Lady, if one may inquire?"

"She thought little Denis looked pale!" cried my Lord, and gave a great guffaw.

" You may laugh, Madam," said Kitty, as Mrs. Lafone tinkled delicately. " There are feelings which only a mother can understand."

Mistress Lafone was childless.

" One excuse will serve as well as another." My Lord let himself fall into a chair that creaked threateningly beneath his weight.

" Oh, I seek for no excuse," quoth Molly Lafone. Crouching on the low stool, she had a singular air of astuteness, in spite of her fostered childishness. " I never can understand why people should not tell the truth." She raised arch eyes towards my Lord, while Kitty sat with the majesty of an Eastern idol, and had not as much as the quiver of an eyelash.

" I'm here to curry favour with royalty," she laughed again sweetly, " like the rest of us ! "

The brazenness of it ! My Lord guffawed again. He certainly was in a most unpleasant mood.

" Huthen. I hope you'll be as successful as my Lady there ! "

" Oh ! My Lady Kilcroney ! . . ."

" Sure, isn't it the surprise of her life." Kilcroney once again waded heavily in sarcasm. " She hadn't as much as the faintest notion such a thing could happen to her—had you, me Lady ? She hadn't as much as opened her mouth for the plum "—it was perhaps the purple artifice on the table that suggested the simile—" but didn't it drop into it ? It's going to be Lady-in-Waiting she is, in place of my Lady Flo——"

" Oh ! my Lord, say you so ? Says he right, my dearest Lady Kilcroney ? 'Tis the most splendid, the most monstrous delightful news I've heard this long time. Oh ! " cried Mrs. Lafone, clasping and wringing her hands in an ecstasy. " May not your little Molly rejoice with you ? "

" You are vastly disinterested," said Kitty.

Mrs. Lafone gave her tinkling laugh.

" Ah, my Lady—indeed, my Lord, I have said that

I am frank. Dearest Lady Kilcroney, I will be frank—If I could obtain some little post—the teeniest, weeniest little post at court——".

But Kitty interrupted, bouncing out of her stateliness.

"Pray, Mrs. Lafone, for what post should you consider yourself qualified about the august person of our gracious Queen?"

"Oh! My Lady Kilcroney, the least little post in all the world! Hath not the Queen appointed a plain Miss Burney reader? I believe I could very well be reader. Mr. Lafone says I have a silver tone in my voice, and our curate at home once told me——"

"Tush, the celebrated Miss Burney hath qualifications, child, which you in your foolishness fail to appreciate."

"Yet she is but a music teacher's daughter, Madam," said Molly with a mighty sigh. She dropped her white eyelids and turned a green glint on my Lord, and sighed again. "Or if not actually about her Majesty—who am I, indeed, to aspire to that Presence?—some office about yourself, dear Lady Kilcroney. I would be your secretary, your Lady-in-waiting, your devoted attendant!"

"This is folly," cried Kitty. "I am by no means appointed to my Lady Flo's post, and if I were—well, to be frank with you, Lafone, since you like frankness so much—you are the last person in the world I should ever be instrumental in bringing to court. Heavens!" cried Kitty, gazing upwards at the low ceiling, as if she saw through it into the celestial regions. "What discretion, what faultless propriety of conduct, what a delicate sense of responsibility, what a blameless record should be demanded of one who would enter that sacred circle! . . ."

(It was the glint of her visitor's green eye at my Lord which gave this stern decision to Kitty's tones.)

Here, quite unexpectedly, and with admirable effectiveness, large tears rose in Mrs. Lafone's eyes and rolled down her cheeks, without in the least disturbing the prettiness of her pointed visage. My Lord cast a glance from one to the other; it was lit with a tender sympathy as it fell on this touching impersonation of grief, and kindled with reproach as it shot to Kitty.

Mrs. Lafone gave a small sob.

"Your sweet lady," she said, now audaciously addressing her male champion, "has ever been a friend in need. 'Tis for that, that I have ventured, my Lord, that I have ventured to come to her to-day, hearing—yes! I will own it, I already knew that she was like to be next in the Queen's choice. I made the journey hither in the hopes—'tis for no reason of petty vanity, no mere envious ambition——" (Thus the minx). . . . "oh! my Lord, I scarce know why, I have ever been sadly persecuted. I am the victim of evil tongues! . . . My reputation has been assailed . . ."

"Ha!" said Kitty. The ejaculation leaped from her.

Molly Lafone produced another silver sob. "Quite unfoundedly, I do assure you! My conscience is spotless, my Lady Kilcroney, spotless!"—she caught Kitty's eye, and went on in a humble voice—"in this instance! Indeed, my Lady—but Mr. Lafone—I am sadly maligned, he is suspicious, he——" Here the unfortunate young woman became quite incoherent in her demonstrations of distress. She wrung her white hands with extra pathos. Another large tear flowed, and a volley of little sobbing, disjointed phrases accompanied it, "domestic happiness—ignorance of the world—poor little me, country-bred and guileless—salvation or despair!"

In the midst, Kitty rose, returning to majesty.

"I must put a stop to a scene so useless and so painful. How is it possible, Madam, you do not see that every word you utter but marks the impossibility of your

request? Pray, my Lord, see Mistress Lafone to her chair."

"Kitty!" cried Kilcroney, springing to his feet. He had not thought it of her, to requite these open-hearted confidences with insult; to turn so trusting and touching a creature into the street; a lady—an old friend! "Pray Mistress Lafone, let us be offering you a dish of tea," cried he.

There are days when everything goes askew. Kitty's great footman marched into the room and presented his mistress with a letter which, he said, had just been brought by a riding messenger. Kitty took it from the salver with all the air of one glad of the diversion, but no sooner had she perused it than she exclaimed, in tones of such consternation, that my Lord leant forward and took it out of her hand. He exclaimed in his turn, but in accents of pleasure.

"Why, what is this? Sure, Alanna, there is naught here to upset you, 'tis the best of good fortune on the contrary! Here's your sweet friend, my Lady Mandeville, actually at Malvern and proposing to drive over and spend the day with you to-morrow, bringing her little rogue to play with ours."

"Oh, this is intolerable," cried Kitty, "this is past bearing! Bid the messenger wait. Good heavens, do I not hear him riding away?—Call him back, my Lord, call him back! On no account must my Lady Mandeville be permitted to visit me to-morrow."

My Lord stood rooted to the spot, and the veins on his forehead swelled. Kitty rushed to the window and hailed vigorously; the rhythmic footfalls of a horse receding at slow pace along the cobble stones was, on a sudden, altered to the clatter of a returning trot.

"Damnation!" cried my Lord. "This passes all!"

Mistress Lafone had stopped the wringing of hands and the production of tears, and was all malicious interest.

Kilcroney had entered into a towering passion. He protested that it was the most monstrous low thing, that he forbade my Lady to behave so base to her friend.

"Tare an' ounds!" cried he, "if it wasn't ashamed you were, and that, not a minute ago, to be enjoying the finest hospitality in the world, the kindest, the most open-hearted, 'tis not ashamed you should be to return a thrifle of it! Shame!" ejaculated Denis. "Shame! 'tis on the other leg. Gad, 'tis the shameful bit of meanness you'd be practising and 'tis ashamed I am of you meself (that I should live to say it). Your best friend! And all for what? For what if ye please? For the favour of them that never as much as acknowledged your existence. 'Pon me soul, rather than wound the feelings of that angel upon earth, that fair, fond, gentle, noble creature——" My Lord's voice cracked. "I'd see the whole of Windsor, and Kew to boot, tumble into the Liffey."

Kitty, white under her delicate smears of rouge, sat down at her writing-table with the most sublime air of offended virtue, but the hand that dipped the pen into the ink shook, and there were tears in the voice which presently declared that if ever there was woman here maligned by her own husband, it was my Lady Kilcroney: she who had not liked to disturb her Lord, but who had nevertheless noticed a red spot behind their darling little Denis's ear that very morning; which spot, as every one who was a mother knew, might very well betoken no less a malady than the measles, which malady, being highly infectious to young children, she, as a mother, now felt it her duty to put off her cherished Lady Mandeville and the adored little Impington to a more auspicious day.

"Spot!" interrupted my Lord, with a roar between derision and wrath, and

"Spot?" cooed Mistress Lafone, now letting herself go openly to insolence. "My dearest Lady Kilcroney, you are too droll!"

There was contempt written on the countenances of the pair so odiously conjoined against Kitty; neither of them being subtle enough to see that my Lady was content with any excuse, so long as it flung a veil of elegance over her set purpose.

This incomparable woman recovered herself, rose, summoned Pompey, and sent him forth with her letter to my Lord Mandeville's groom. She watched its delivery, through the window, and having beheld the man start off again, returned to the centre of the room, made in silence a profound curtsy, which included her Lord and her visitor, and sailed forth, closing the door carefully behind her.

My Lord let himself fall again into the arm-chair, and once more this article of furniture protested with ominous creaks and cracks.

"There's not a stick in the place, bejabers, that isn't as rotten as pears. 'Pon my word," grumbled Denis Kilcroney, "I wish the plaguy waters had never been discovered, I do indeed; 'tis a poor thing when a man's own son and heir is made a weapon against him, and him but turned of three. 'Little Denis is pale, and we must to Cheltenham. And we'll lie at Lady Mandeville's, which is on our way, my love' (and it thirty miles out, taking the back and the forth of it). 'And our little Denis will have a playfellow, 'twill be so vastly good for him. Little Impington and he will be comrades.' And scarce are we settled at Impington Court with as good entertainment—aye—and as generous ('tis the cellar of the world my Lord Mandeville has, and 'tis as free with it he is—troth, as I'd be meself if my Lady'd let me, and I can give him no finer character!) No sooner are we settled, and scarce a cork drawn ye may say, but 'tis 'Little Impington is too rough for our darling Denis. He will teach him ill ways, he will do him a hurt. And Impington Court is a thought too low for the child's health. And we must move on to Cheltenham, my love, or there will not be a lodging to be had.' And you should have seen the

farewells, the clingings, the embracings, and the tears, and heard the promises. 'We shall meet again soon, my dearest, dearest Rachel. I vow I'll not be parted from the most cherished of my friends! And now 'tis: 'Keep away—little Denis hath a spot!' To be sure, our dearest Rachel must not cast a blight over my Lady's Court prospects."

"But why, pray you, why, my Lord Kilcroney, should my Lady Mandeville cast a blight? Is she not in the Court favour?"

Mistress Molly's tones were as insinuating as the fillet of sweetness that issues from a flute; nevertheless, Denis, starting from his black mood, gave her a sudden odd look.

"Prithee, why, my Lord?"

Kitty was in the right of it. The little jade was as false as loaded dice! As if every one did not know poor Rachel's story; how she had been a Quaker and an actress, and my Lord Mandeville's mistress before she had been his wife; and how, save for that one stain, which, indeed, had been the fall of a pure woman piteously and devotedly in love, she had ever shone in a wicked world, the noblest example to her sex.

Mistress Lafone caught my Lord's look upon her and deemed it time to depart. Without waiting, therefore, for his reply to her question, she feigned horror at the lateness of the hour, and bustled away from the Kilcroney lodgings, malcontent with her visit, the more so that my Lord Kilcroney brought a wooden countenance and a dry manner to the very hall door.

She went forth down the single street and across the meadows; for her rooms were in an out-of-the-way cottage, far from the fashionable quarter patronised by the well-to-do. Mrs. Lafone's fortunes were indeed at a low ebb. Her elderly, niggardly husband had vowed some time ago that he would pay no more debts for her, and he was keeping his vow. In her efforts at self-

extrication, Mistress Molly, not having a scrupulous delicacy of conduct, had become further considerably entangled. A scandal threatened which might be the undoing of her. And there was my Lady Kilcroney not only declining to help her, but as good as turning her out of the house!

Molly Lafone was sharp of scent as a weasel. It was unpleasantly clear to her that the irate great lady was determined to seize the first opportunity of cutting her altogether; and when my Lady Kilcroney, leader of society as she was, cast her off, she would be lost indeed! She had no thought in her breast, as she walked along the road between the flat fields, but the longing to pay Kitty out.

The way was deserted. Evening shadows were lengthening across the mellowness of the sun-steeped plain. Molly Lafone slackened her pace. Why, indeed, should she hurry back to the stuffy little room where she could afford herself no better supper than bread and milk?

Truly, if there are angels who reward the virtuous, there must be little demons who provide dainties for those who serve the ways of evil! There, just at her feet, shining quite golden in the rays of the setting sun, lay a letter.

It lay so that its superscription was visible, and Molly could hardly believe her eyes when she read in Kitty's writing the words: "For the hand of my Lady, the Countess Mandeville."

"The careless fellow," said she, "he's dropped it from his belt as he jogged along. Pshaw, how I hate a clumsy fool!"

Then she laughed shrilly. "My Lady Mandeville will never get her Kitty's affectionate answer, nor hear how little Denis hath a spot, and she will come driving in to-morrow to hang herself and her tarnished name round Kitty's neck for all Cheltenham to see, under the nose of the virtuous Queen Charlotte. That is very well done!"

cried Molly. "That is a very fit punishment for such base intentions. I am very glad."

And lest anyone should be busybody enough to pick up the dropped letter and forward it to its destination, which would be a sad interference with the just action of Providence, Mistress Lafone picked it up herself and minced it into small pieces as she walked along towards her cottage lodging. She had quite a good appetite for her bread and milk that night.

It had been my Lady Kilcroney's intention to keep her cherished little Denis in his cot, for the space of at least a day, for indeed there was more than one red mark on the satin of his small, plump body, and Kitty vowed it was of a piece with the rest of my Lord's brutality to declare that those who leave their own homes for the discomforts of lodgings must expect the occasional flea. But on receipt of a letter sent round by my Lady Flora's woman, she promptly altered her plans, and ordered the protesting cherub to be arrayed in his best robe-coat covered with fine muslin, and his white satin hat with feathers.

My Lord, as soon as his infant's roars had been soothed by candies, picked up the letter which Kitty had dropped on the floor in her hurried exit to her bed-chamber; and, while his Lady was alternately pealing at her bell and shouting for Lydia, without compunction read it.

"My Dearest Lady Kilcroney: 'Tis all arranged. I consider my freedom well purchased at the price of the rose-point flounce, and the service to a friend, no less, by the trimmings to match. Her Majesty received me in her closet last evening, and the matter was settled quick. I must confess, dearest Kitty, with all the veneration *and* love (these words were heavily underlined) *that I cherish for her August Person, I did feel it hard to find that my poor feet were represented as the dropsy. Dropsy, my*

love. And I but turned of thirty! 'You should have warned me,' said Her Majesty, 'that you were suffering from a disease.' 'Ma'am,' said I, 'if disease there is'—(I was afraid to deny it, dear Kitty, lest the fetters should not be struck off my aching ankles)—'twas contracted in Your Majesty's service.' And now if my Kilcroney has a taste for gilded slavery (though there's less gilding than you would believe), let her be at the entrance of the pump room, to receive Her Majesty at the head of the other lady visitors, on her first visit thither this very morning at eleven o'clock. The Gentlemen-in-Waiting are informing the other notabilities of the town, and Her Majesty is prepared for the little ceremony which she desires shall have the appearance of an Impromptu, it being her wish to avoid state during the Royal Visit and not to be incommoded by the crowd. If your little Denis were to offer a bunch of roses, it would, I think, please the Queen, who likes to see ladies occupied of their children and is interested in any who are about the age of the Princess Amelia. From what Mrs. Schwellenburg—oh! Kitty, to think of that toad festooned about with my lace—hath wrote to me (thank God we have left the frog-fancier *behind at Windsor) I understand you can consider the appointment as good as made——"*

The letter dropped from Kilcroney's hand. His good-natured face (for in spite of tantrums he was to the core a man of good nature), clouded with genuine dismay. It looked as if the plaguey business, which he had regarded in the light of a mere game, was like to turn to earnest.

Why; in the name of Heaven, a woman with all the world could give her, and a devoted husband besides, should break up her family life for the pleasures of an annual three months' slavery—Lady Florence had well named it—passed his comprehension.

"Nay, Lydia," Kitty's voice was uplifted in the other room, "take back the tabby; aye, and the satin cloak

from Madame Mirabel's. I have thought better of it, child. Put away the Eglantine new hat with the feathers. I will wear muslin and a plain straw. I wish to Heaven," cried Kitty pettishly, "that there was a milliner in the Kingdom who could run up a hat to suit a lady's eyelashes or the tilt of her nose outside Paris."

"There's the Italian straw we bought last time we was staying over there at Madame the Duchess's," said Lydia tentatively; "the same your ladyship ordered for yourself to wear at the *Feet* at Trianon to which the French Queen asked us—and a sweet elegant creature Her Majesty is, with all her fancies for dairies and such—and the thunderstorm coming on it was the disappointment of the world, and one that I am not like to forget in a hurry! Sure your ladyship ain't forgotten it? A plain rice straw, with a ribbon round, but with a set to it! Aye, and trimmed by my blood-niece, as is apprenticed to Madame Eglantine out of my own poor savings; me being always one to stand by my family, cost what it do."

"The Italian straw," my Lady reflected; "'twas monstrous thoughtful of you, child, to pack it—la, Lydia, 'tis the very thing—trimmed by your niece did you say? Nay, only the genius of Eglantine could twist a bow like that. Put it on my head. Why, 'tis perfect—aye, I will wear it. Her Majesty desires simplicity."

"Simplicity, is it?" Kilcroney groaned. "God help us all!"

As Kitty sallied forth, all in vapoury white, fresh and sweet as a privet blossom, her face delicately pink under the artful shepherdess hat, Pompey following with the great rose-bunch in a bandbox, and little Denis trotting alongside scarlet-cheeked from a triumphant battle royal over the wearing of gloves, my Lord looked after them with some melancholy.

"I'll stroll along presently and keep in the background.

I'd not like to be blighting Kitty's prospects after the fashion of yonder poor Rachel. By all accounts Her gracious Majesty Queen Charlotte is no more like to fancy an Irishman than the unhappy girl that has a mistake to her name."

Kitty had determined to walk to the pump room. 'Twas scarce a hundred yards away, and " squeeze those crisp flounces into a chair before they had served their purpose—never ! " She had taken but a few steps along the street when who should cross her but Mrs. Lafone. Molly, all in the modesty of lilac dimity, with pensiveness, something even approaching penitence, on her pert face. Kitty was in a fair humour, and as her little enemy flung her a deprecating glance of green eyes, actually paused and smiled.

" Whither away, Lafone ? "

" Alas, my Lady Kilcroney, stepping into the pump room anon to drink my glass of the waters, I heard as how Her Majesty was expected, and how you and the other ladies of note are to receive her on this, her first appearance. . . . My Lady Kilcroney, knowing myself so unfit, feeling myself so out of spirits, I deemed it more becoming to retire till all was over."

Now Kitty, riding on the top of the wave, was a trifle intoxicated. It was in a tone of almost Royal patronage that she exclaimed :

" Why should you miss the sight, child ? You could very well find a little place where you could see and not be seen. Retrace your steps with me."

" Oh ! My Lady Kilcroney," cries Molly, with her dramatic clasp of the hands, " was there ever anyone so truly benevolent as you are ! "

Hanging her head, the little minx started off, a humble step behind her patroness, and, looking over his shoulder at her, Denis the younger was fascinated by the wicked mockery on her face, and nearly fell into a puddle for staring.

There was no excitement in the town, for Her Majesty's

intention was known but to the favoured few. The Royal Family, it was bruited, were still reposing from the fatigues of their journey. There was, however, a small group of gentlemen about the pump room doors, in elegant morning attire, and two or three barouches and as many chairs were in the very act of depositing their fair burdens as Lady Kilcroney sailed up. She was just in time, indeed, to see Lady Verney—black-browed Susan, panting, flushed, incredibly plumed—hurl herself out of her hired sedan. At sight of Kitty this personage halted in her rush forward into the pump room.

"You here, dear Kilcroney?" her voice shook. There was fury in her eye.

"Even so, dear Verney. Pray, my Lord Courtown, shall I take my stand on this spot? Hither with the flowers, Pompey. My little son is to offer these to Her Majesty, Colonel Digby; certainly 'twould be a mercy if you would have the kindness to hold them till the right moment comes. Such tender years are scarcely to be trusted!—Nay, Denis, lambkin, no more sugar plums till we get home again, or little pandies would be so sticky, Denis couldn't give the nosegay to the beautiful Queen—What a pity, my dearest Susan, you should have made yourself so fine. By Her Majesty's most express wish, all is to have the appearance of the simplest impromptu! Still, my skirts are fairly wide. If you place yourself behind me——"

Place herself behind Kitty! Had her beloved friend run mad, she that was always so flighty? My Lady Verney to place herself in the rear, be hidden by another's flounces, she who had posted day and night, all the way from Hertfordshire, upon the news of a probable vacancy about the Queen's person! Was it possible that Kitty, with her Irish husband, labelled with such a name, could fancy that she was like to meet with the Queen's favour? Susan was sorry for her poor friend. She tossed her head with a snort. My Lady Verney had something of the appearance of a handsome horse.

But stupefaction succeeded indignation when Lord Courtown, very civilly addressing her, begged her to take her place with the other ladies in the rear of my Lady Kilcroney, for the royal party might be expected any moment.

"Mrs. Tracy, ma'am, as one conversant in these matters, will you stand at my Lady's elbow?—My Lady Kilcroney, Mrs. Tracy—Her Majesty's Senior Bedchamber Woman, who is at the waters on her own account."

My Lady Verney, biting her lip, stamped heavily on her neighbour's foot as she shifted her position. Turning at the low cry, her fierce black eyes met the plaintive green ones of Mrs. Lafone, who in spite of her discreet protestations, had taken as forward a place in the group as well she could. As a rule Molly was in no better favour with Susan Verney than with the rest of the coterie, but at that moment they shared a sentiment which made them suddenly and momentarily sympathetic.

"Oh, my Lady Verney," whispered Molly, "did you ever see anyone so sadly cocked up as our poor Kitty? It frightens me for her, it does indeed. I fear such pride must have a fall."

Although Susan could see no sign of this prognostication being fulfilled, it comforted her nevertheless; and she was able to bear, with a better equanimity than any who knew her would have thought possible, the painful spectacle of my Lady Kilcroney's success with the Queen. Success it indubitably was, though Her Majesty was a dry woman and not given to displays of affability. It was evident that she had come prepared to be pleased with Kitty Kilcroney and that pleased she found herself. And truly, Kitty in her snowy flounces, so charmingly blushing under her wide-brimmed hat—which was indeed trimmed by Lydia's niece, Miss Pamela Pounce—Kitty so daintily maternal with the sturdy little boy clutching his roses,

was as pretty a picture as any would wish to gaze upon.

The two blooming Princesses exclaimed upon the darling child, and good-natured Lady Flo was one broad beam behind " her Royals' " back. And if Kitty blushed she had nevertheless the most elegant ease. Her curtsy was a model; the dignified modesty with which she advanced and then retreated within the due measure of etiquette was perfect of its kind. And when the incident took place, which might indeed have proved awkward, of Master Denis declining to part with his posy. his mother saved the situation. " Denis," quoth she, bending but not whispering; all with a modest assurance that could not have been bettered by one who had been years at Court. " Lambkin, do you not remember what I bid you? To whom were you to offer these flowers? "

" To the beautiful Queen," said the child, his great brown eyes roaming about as if he were seeking—as well he might, poor innocent!—whom the description might fit. The Queen, with a flattered smile, herself took the offering from his chubby fingers.

" Pretty rogue! " said Princess Augusta.

When the other introductions had been gone through it seemed to be nobody's business to present Mistress Lafone; and though the equerries looked tentatively at her and then at my Lady Kilcroney, nothing could be less responsive than that usually alert being. So Molly made an artless curtsy as became her simplicity, and thought, in her disloyal heart, how frumpish and dowdy Her Majesty looked; and wondered if 'twas Miss Burney who appeared so shortsighted and awkward and timid, with no more air than nothing at all. And save for the gentlemen, who were very personable and had bright looks about them as if they might be enjoyable company to a woman of spirit, there was really naught in this vision of the Court which would make her, little Molly, yearn for it—a vast stiffness and dullness indeed! If

it had not been that needs must when the devil drives she would have snapped her slender fingers and 'thank you,' but as matters stood—the drowning do not pause to contemplate the quality of the spar flung to them.

Mrs. Lafone looked vindictively at Kitty and then turned a watchful glance at the door. She wondered how soon and in what circumstances Kitty's dearest friend, who was not received at Court, might make her appearance? However Kitty might strive to hide the visit, Mrs. Lafone would take care that it should be known of; she had but to whisper the fact to my Lady Verney and she did not doubt that the Royal occupants of Fauconberg Hall would promptly be in possession of the damning fact. Other people could put spokes in wheels besides my Lady Kilcroney; and the more swiftly they were rolling to favour, the greater might be the upset!

Her Majesty, talking very affably to Kitty, had advanced towards the counter where the waters were distributed. Here divers magnates of the town were awaiting her, whom the Comptroller of the Household, my Lord Courtown, named to her, one after the other. Kitty and her group of ladies were left thus for the moment outside the Royal circle of attention. The hall by this time contained a certain amount of curious spectators, very respectfully aligned against the walls, for the public of Cheltenham, genteel quiet folk, would have died rather than presume on Her Majesty's condescending informality.

"Pray," said the Queen, to Mr. Clark, the town doctor, "let me have a taste of the water, sir, to drink which the King has been sent hither. I ought at least to know," she added archly, "to what penance he hath been condemned."

She sipped and declared she had expected worse; Princess Royal and Princess Augustus also sipped, but they cried out and protested that they were sorry for

dear papa. And while the Royal pleasantries were producing the most exquisite if refined mirth throughout the whole assembly, Mrs. Lafone, who had been conscious that she was the object of considerable interest to one of the equerries (indeed, he was lifting his quizzing glass to mark his notice), perceived his glance wander from herself and become fixed. He dropped his quizzing glass, the better to see; a warmth of wondering admiration, prodigiously different from the familiar ogle she had herself evoked, wrote itself on his countenance. But for the presence of Royalty, she thought he might have exclaimed out loud. Molly's glance promptly followed his. She could hardly believe her eyes. Here was fate playing her game with a vengeance. Her enemy was delivered into her hands. Every one knew the face of Rachel Peace!

My Lady Mandeville advanced, clad, like Kitty herself, in white, but with a flutter of grey ribbons here and there to mark her Quaker preference. Her delicate pale face was faintly flushed, under the wide brim of her simple hat. She was not less fair than the pearls at her throat, not less shining in delicate beauty. She held by the hand a noble boy, slightly older than little Denis, who marched as if the place belonged to him and gazed about under frowning brows as though he wondered who dared occupy it without his permission.

If Kitty made a charming picture with her little son, Rachel, with the heir of Mandeville, graceful and gracious, with a lovely tenderness emanating from her, was the very embodiment of sweet motherhood.

She came across the wide hall with swift step, looking from right to left, a smile hovering on her lips, her seeking eyes already lit with fond pleasure. Where was her dear Kitty? Suddenly she stopped—the smile faded, the light of the expectant gaze went out, shadow fell upon her radiance, a flutter as of fear shook her; yet she had but encountered the gaze of my Lady Verney. Susan Verney, who was very well acquainted with Rachel

Mandeville, who had indeed also tasted of her hospitality, both in town and in the country, now withered her with a blasting stare of denegation, a stare which said: "My Lady Mandeville, I am pure virtue to-day, *I do not know you.*"

The room was all eyes to look at Rachel, and though so decorous it was all whispers.

The next moment the poor thing saw the Queen and the Princesses, and Kitty Kilcroney white as death and good Lady Flora scarlet in the face; she saw and understood. Motionless she strove to rally her courage. She wanted strength of heart and clearness of mind to do just what would be right; Quaker Rachel who had never done wrong but once! And for that breathless moment, unknown to herself, her eyes hung on Kitty's face; and Kitty's eyelids were cast down.

The little Viscount Impington tugged at her hand. His was an impatient spirit.

"Come on, Mamma," cried he, in loud authority; and at the same moment little Denis O'Hara raised a piping cry: "Imp, Imp, Imp!" and tearing himself from the maternal clasp, galloped across the room to hurl himself upon his baby comrade.

The Queen looked at Kitty with an air of profound surprise and disapproval, and Kitty looked back at the Queen. And her heart rose within her; for, with all her foibles and fancies, she had a heart.

It led her then to do the noblest act of her whole existence.

Holding herself very erect and moving with a beautiful dignity, she slowly backed the length of the room that divided her from Rachel Mandeville; and, keeping her eyes on the Royal face the while, she took her friend by the hand. Then she stood very upright and waited. Rachel could do naught else but wait too.

In the dead silence the Queen prepared to take her departure.

Little Mr. O'Hara and my Lord Impington were beginning to show signs of following up their affectionate greeting with a rough-and-tumble fight and each mother had to take possession of her child and keep him firmly held; but they kept tighter hold of each other still.

The Royal group advanced; the kindly young Princesses with awed looks, as if they felt how ill things were going without understanding. When she reached my Lady Kilcroney and her friend, Queen Charlotte paused and seemed to hesitate. She cast a strange troubled glance at the two young women, and Kitty and Rachel fell, still clasping hands, into a great curtsy. And the question was, which of the two made it with a nobler grace.

The last of the equerries to follow looked back at the door, and saw my Ladies Mandeville and Kilcroney embracing and kissing and he thought they were both in tears.

My Lord Kilcroney had been among those who unobtrusively joined the lookers-on in the pump room during the Royal visitation, and, beholding the scene, his own eyes filled. In the effort to regain his self-control he turned his dimmed gaze away from the two who enfolded each other in such affecting and unaffected friendship and it fell upon Mistress Lafone. As awhile ago his son and heir, he was fascinated by the expression on the small pale visage. Molly caught his riveted glance, wilted beneath it, and somehow vanished. Not my Lord Kilcroney nor anyone could ever as much as guess at her share in the morning's business; yet so does conscience make cowards of us all, as Mr. Shakespeare has it.

My Lord kissed his wife's hand before most respectfully saluting that of my Lady Mandeville. At sight of him, Kitty mingled laughter with her tears.

"Is it not delightful, Denis," cried she, "that our sweet Rachel should have had this happy thought?

But, oh, my dear love, our little rascals are at fisticuffs again!"

"*My dear Kitty,*" wrote Lady Florence that evening, in a letter brought round from Fauconberg Hall by one of the pages in waiting, "*I thought you were dished, I did indeed. And of all the odd tiresome* contretemps, *my love! . . . Well, I have not time to say even a word of what I felt: Her Majesty is not fond of audacities and you did, dearest Kitty, the most audacious deed . . Well, never mind again!*

"*'Twas your hat did the trick to begin with, my love; you was always so clever about clothes, Kitty. Sure, it was the finest inspiration to wear that modest country straw with its plain ribbon. It caught Her Majesty's eye from the first moment, and that you know means so much. So modest, sensible and quiet you showed beside poor Susan! Susan, with that tow-row of feathers on her head! 'Tis she who is dished after all: 'A loud young woman,' says the Queen to me. 'I do not approve of Lady Verney's style.' And what must she do on the top of it but present herself in my parlour at Fauconberg Hall this very afternoon?—a vast piece of presumption, since the Queen hath forbidden visitors to all and sundry! —And wants an interview of Her Majesty, to apologise—prithee, Kitty, think of it! —for Her Majesty's having been exposed to such a meeting. She, to apologise for the town! She, to cast her stone at poor Rachel! I have never known my Royal so angry! 'Are you then not acquainted with my Lady Mandeville?' She asks our Verney. You should have seen Susan's face under her red plumes.* (*I had taken good care Her Majesty should know we* all *were.*) *To be brief, Kitty, Verney went forth with her comb considerably cut, and Her Majesty took a twist in the other direction and spoke very kind to me; though regretting the incident, she said she could not find too grave a fault with a display of*

loyalty. 'Tell my Lady Kilcroney,' she says, 'that about My Person I appreciate loyalty!"

Denis Kilcroney heard the contents of this missive with a grave countenance. Then, looking at his wife's charming face, all irradiated between the joys of her good conscience and its unexpected reward, he exclaimed generously that it was a proud day for the House of O'Hara. "Though," he added, "the proudest moment of it all was when I saw you stand by your friend, me darling girl!"

CHAPTER II

In Which Miss Pamela Pounce is ordered to Pack

Pamela Pounce sat with a bunch of cowslips in one hand and the lid of the ribbon box in the other; she had fallen into a profound muse.

It was the cowslips, though they were but artifice, which had set her active brain thus suddenly and idly day-dreaming. They had brought her back with a rush to the old farm where she had been born and brought up. The whole surroundings of her exile had vanished. She was no longer in the big, bare, stuffy, untidy workroom at the back of Madame Eglantine's celebrated Paris hat shop: in the centre of snippets and straws, feathers, fringes, flowers and other fashionable fripperies; under the glare of the skylight; with the patter and gabble of French voices, the click of scissors, the long-drawn sighs or quick pants of energetic stitching, the rustle of crumpled silks, in her ears, and in her nostrils the indescribable atmosphere of the *atélier*, as it was called. An apartment hermetically sealed to the outer airs, save what might penetrate of them through the opening of its doors; redolent of the gums of artificial flowers, of last year's and this morning's succulent cookery—Monsieur Ildefonse, the husband of Madame Eglantine, liked a point of garlic in most dishes—and of the faint sickly scents of hair powder and fine lady's perfumes which hung about the whole establishment. There were other odours in the workroom besides, of which the less said the better. It was little wonder that Pamela Pounce

should now and again feel her splendid vitality slacken; that she should have considerably fined down from a country buxomness since she had joined Madame Eglantine's staff.

But the bunch of cowslips had brought her away—far away from it all for a blissful moment.

She was back again at home. The exquisite freshness of an early summer morning on the Kentish downs encompassed her. Her young bosom lifted with ecstasy. Oh! the breath of England: pungent of the sea, sweet of the moorland herbs, free from the hills and whispering of the woods, was there ever anything like it? There was a fragrance of breadmaking too from mother's oven, and a lovely reek of burning weeds where father was busy over the potato fields!

Pamela started. A voice, sharp as a pen-knife, had recalled her to reality.

"Ah, Meess"—she went by no other name in this French servitude, either from her employer or her sister workers. It was an unconscious tribute to a certain fine apartness of character, as well as to her British independence. "Ah, Meess," cried Madame Eglantine, "is this how I find you? Asleep with your eyes open! My faith, is this how you conduct yourself in the thick of the business hours? And the Marquise who expects that hat by noon'!"

Pamela opened her day-dreaming eyes full upon the speaker, gave an inaudible sigh and a small ironic smile. She did not start or blush or show any sign either of flurry or vexation at the acrid accent of the rebuke, she was too completely mistress of herself for that. Her hand hovered over the ribbon box; then with a decisive movement she nipped a shimmering purple roll and began to draw out its darkly radiant lengths.

"Purple!" ejaculated Madame Eglantine, surprised into a quite amiable tone; "purple for that blonde Marquise who is not yet twenty! And she means to wear all white muslins with lace in floods. Did I not tell

you so? That ribbon I bought for *Madame la Gouvernante*—it is for dowagers——"

She broke off and stared.

Pamela had twisted and snipped and pinched and the hat was trimmed in what her famous *patronne* herself would have described as "*un tour de main.*" She now held it up on her balled hand, and turned it slowly from side to side.

"But it is a stroke of genius!" exclaimed the little Frenchwoman. She hated Pamela, but she was above all an artist. "No, no, do not touch it again, no one must touch it! You have a thousand times reason. Blue or green or pink—anyone with the ordinary mind would have blended me the banal pretty-pretty with those cowslips. The Marquise would have been but one of a score of shepherdesses, no more distinguished than a dragée box for a baptism! But now——"

She paused and waved her hands before the delight of the mental picture. A small, dusky woman with very bright eyes and extraordinarily swift movements, she was like some quick furry animal of the mouse tribe; a greater contrast to the fair, large, composed English girl could hardly be imagined; yet on one point these two were singularly akin. Both were geniuses in the same restricted yet fascinating realm of art.

If there were a creature on earth capable of stepping straight off into the shoes of Madame Eglantine, first milliner in the world of Fashion, it was Pamela Pounce, the British yeoman's daughter!

Perhaps it was this consciousness of her rival's merits which made the Frenchwoman, while too acute of intellect not to recognise them, regard her clever apprentice with feelings which approached detestation. Yet she was soon to find another cause.

"I'd better put in the stitches myself, I suppose, M'dame?" said Pamela tranquilly. She spoke French fluently by this time, with a pronounced if not unpleasing British accentuation. "The young ladies are so fond

of sewing things to death. It's like a hand on pastry," she went on meditatively, as she bit her thread, and flung a cool, tantalising glance at the irate ring of countenances about her. " You have, or you haven't got it, and no one to blame."

" That will do, Meess. There is too much conversation here, Mademoiselle Panache ! " Madame hopped spitefully from Pamela upon the directress, who, sitting large, square and sallow at the centre table, dispensing materials, had permitted herself a gratified smile over the snubbing of the English girl. For a moment or two there was silence in the over-lighted, under-ventilated apartment. The season was early July ; a blazing white sunshine was pouring down through the casements which their muffed glass but feebly mitigated.

Then the little angry, sharp-toothed mouse that was the bland, coaxing, fluent Eglantine of the showroom found a fresh grievance.

" My God, Mademoiselle Anatoline, are you making a bouquet or tying bristles on a broomstick ? And Heaven pardon me, Mademoiselle Eulalie, but if those hands of yours have been washed since—since—— What have you been doing with those hands, *ma fille ?* Blacking the boots or scratching your head ? "

Anatoline, who was large and fat and fair, became an apoplectic purple ; and Eulalie, who was the colour of a lemon with hair like a raven's wing, turned a shade more livid than nature had made her.

There was a titter, beginning sycophantically upon the lips of Mademoiselle Panache. But Pamela's smooth face, white where it was not delicately carnation, might have been that of a handsomely tinted statue. She cut her thread, tweaked one of the shimmering purple loops, and once again putting the hat on her clenched hand, gave it a little shake. The creation was complete !

Madame's swift beady eye rolled in her direction.

" Give yourself the trouble to bring that upstairs to the

showroom, Meess," she ordered. "Madame D'Aimargues said she would call, herself, before midday, to try it on before it was sent. I will join you presently and you had better remain, in case there were required an alteration."

"*Bien, M'dame,*" Pamela responded with some alacrity. She might get a whiff of good open air as she went up the stairs. There might even be a window ajar in the showroom. Such a miracle had been known to occur on a very hot day.

Monsieur Ildefonse, Eglantine's husband, was sitting in the little glass cage off the back showroom, pompously referred to as the *Bureau.* This individual had once been a very noted personality; no other, actually, than the French Queen's appointed coiffeur; in consequence sought after to frenzy by every woman with the smallest pretension to Fashion. Fine ladies had had their heads dressed at six o'clock in the morning, nay, even three days before some special assembly at Court.

To be able to say, with a toss of flying vaporous curls, exquisitely redolent of *Poudre à la Maréchale:* "In effect, my dear one, Ildefonse's last idea, what do you think of it? It is succeeded. *Hein?*" To be responded to, perchance, with a cry of envy and despair: "Ildefonse! You managed to get Ildefonse!" And to know your interlocutor, younger than you perhaps, and prettier, yet altogether at a disadvantage, "a positive frump, my dear," under less skilful hands, that had been to reach, in verity, the very needle-peak of feminine triumph, a few years ago.

But star succeeds to star; one Monsieur Charles was Court twiddler, curler, crimper, frizzer, and general head artist. For Monsieur Ildefonse had come into a heritage and retired. Not a fallen star, therefore; merely astronomically removed to another hemisphere! He shone now, though, it may be added, with a doubtful radiance, in a restricted connubial circle; in other words, he sat at home and totted up accounts for his clever, money-

making spouse; made bargains for her with flower manufacturers and mercers, and bullied the stewards of great houses when Madame la Duchesse or Madame la Connétable forgot to remember such insignificances as the settlement of bills.

Unanimously the workgirls adored him, with the single exception of Pamela; and the relations between Madame Eglantine and her consort, characterised in public by the most touching demonstrativeness, were regarded as the very romance of matrimony. But Pamela, who had come under the glance, more often than she cared, of Monsieur Ildefonse's slyly roving eye, had her private opinion.

She shuddered from him as she had shuddered from the fat, sleek, brown slugs that came out after rain on the garden walls at home.

As a little girl she would explain: "'Tain't that I'm afraid, you see, but it makes me creep."

She could have found no better words in which to describe the effect upon her of the fascinating Monsieur Ildefonse.

There was a midday lull, this scorching day, even in Madame Eglantine's thriving establishment. It was late season, too, and save for orders like that of the little Marquise D'Aimargues, for such as were privileged to join in the pastimes of Royal haymaking and churning, or a stray wedding order, business was slack, and the great little milliner herself was preparing for that round of the most noted watering places, with "just a few models" in her baggage, which was her thrifty fashion of spending the holidays.

Pamela cast, in passing, a hasty glance between the green curtains of the *Bureau*, to assure herself that her pet aversion was safely employed.

He had removed his wig on account of the heat, and she turned her eyes quickly away from the revolting spectacle of his close-cropped bristling black head and the roll of olive fat at the back of his neck above the embroidered collar of his blue cloth coat.

The pink, be-padded, be-wreathed, be-gilded, be-mirrored, be-draped salons of Madame Eglantine were empty. Pamela walked slowly into the middle of the front room and hesitated. Her own charming shape was reflected from every possible angle. Down below, the whole *Place* seemed asleep; a buzz of flies within and without, a lazy footfall on the shady side and a distant rumble emphasised the universal drowsiness.

When Madame la Marquise's coach came along there would be a prodigious clatter to wake them all up. Pamela knew that she was quite safe. It's all very well to trim a hat. You never know what it's like till you've tried it on.

Very deliberately she divested her glossy chestnut hair of its discreet cap, loosened the swelling waves a trifle more on either side of the firm rose-tinted ivory of her face.

"If a dash of powder was for poor girls like me, I wouldn't be too bad-looking. I'd say that for myself," she thought, and firmly set the hat of the Marquise at the right angle over her radiant brow.

Well, it was a complete success. Like every true artist she was doubly critical of herself, but Pamela had to admit that she could find no flaw in her own taste and that the wide-brimmed curving Italian straw with its bold sweep of purple ribbon, and its hanging bunches of cowslips was a remarkably fine set-off for the glory of her amber hair and the audacious brilliance of her complexion. Without a tinge of envy or discontent she surveyed herself thoughtfully.

"Upon my word, Pamela Pounce, my girl!"—she was fond of addressing herself mentally; as it were her strong reasonable mind to her agreeable body. "You would have held your own with the best of them if it had been the fancy of Providence to set you in the aristocracy. Ugh!"

With a piercing scream she started out of her complacent reflection.

A horrible olive-hued, leering face appeared over her shoulder in the mirror; a blue-clothed arm stole round her waist.

Pamela swung herself free, whisked the hat off her head ready to use it as a weapon should Monsieur Ildefonse pursue his advances.

In the dead pause the quick rustle of Madame Eglantine's light summer flounces were heard on the stairs.

Instantly the ex-hairdresser's countenance lost its satyr smiles, and became composed into its usual mask of smooth propriety.

"Is that you, *mon Agneau rose?*" he cooed.

"Yes, yes, it is I, *petit rat de mon cœur,*" she replied.

These endearments having perfunctorily passed between them, Madame halted on the threshold and sent the glitter of her swift glance from her spouse to her apprentice.

"I took the liberty of trying on the hat what I've just trimmed, M'dame," said Pamela then in her brazen way.

She wasn't going to put it into Monsieur Ildefonse's power to tell on her behind her back, or worse still, to pretend to be shielding her. She knew his slimy ways.

"You do well to call it a liberty," said Madame Ildefonse, showing all her small pointed teeth as if she wanted to bite Pamela. She was panting a little, and there was a sort of whiteness about her nostrils that pointed to considerable if repressed emotion. "But let it pass. You were giving your opinion, I presume, my cabbage-stalk?"

"Meess very naturally wished me to admire your exquisite taste, *ma tendre biche,*" he responded. "'No one,' says she to me, 'but Madame Eglantine could have made this inimitable, this absolutely original and distinguished combination, all the while retaining the stamp of the most high tone.'"

Monsieur Ildefonse was very glib of tongue.

"A-ah!" said Madame, smiling horribly. "You and Meess flatter me in your private conversations."

"My charmer, how can I console myself in your

absence, except by——" he broke off, for at that moment, with sounds of pomp, a thunder of hoofs, a crash and a clatter, the street woke up indeed, as Miss Pounce had prognosticated. And Madame D'Aimargues drove up in her four-horsed coach.

Madame Eglantine cast off her rage, as one may divest oneself of a garment, to be re-assumed at the chosen moment; Monsieur Ildefonse, with a relieved shrug of his huge shoulders, began to retire, cat-footed, to his den.

"Remain as you are, Meess," commanded the milliner, now entirely concentrated on the exigencies of her business.

She shook out her flounces and summoning the bland business smile to her features cast a swift glance at the nearest mirror before taking two steps to greet her valuable patroness.

It was that glance at the mirror which precipitated the catastrophe. By some counter-reflection, Madame Eglantine's jealous eyes caught a vision of Ildefonse, her husband, her cabbage, the little rat of her heart, pausing in his turn to cast a final ogle upon the abandoned, the sly, the seductive, the shameless Meess!

Eglantine beheld that ogle. She swallowed her emotion. She was above all *femme d'affaires*. Everything must give way before the profit of the moment. She could wait.

The little Marquise, blonde and slim and rouged, ethereal yet vivid, fluttered in, fanning herself, tried on her hat, chattered, laughed, approved, exclaimed upon the heat, and, still fanning herself, departed, leaving on Pamela's mind the impression of a glittering butterfly, as lovely, as useless, and as impalpable. You could crush her, thought the girl, between finger and thumb.

Her serious lambent gaze had hardly followed the radiant apparition to the door, when the explosion burst forth.

It was all the more devastating for having been withheld.

Wanton! Hussy! Baggage! Designing intriguing slut! *Meess de Malheur*! What was Pamela, after all, but a stray apprentice, and an English one at that, flung upon her, Madame Eglantine's, benevolence for the sake of old friendship, living on charity, a *beggar! Cette Lydie,* how she had haggled! But if such wickedness had been paid for in all the gold of false Albion, Madame Eglantine would not have kept her, to the destruction of her domestic happiness!

"Meess, you pack this day."

She further added a flood of vituperation, to which Pamela, all her pretty carnations dead on her white cheeks, listened in a fixed silence.

When the French woman had run herself out of breath on a high scream, Pamela answered her in English, which the whilom Bath milliner spoke brokenly, but understood perfectly. "That'll do, M'dame. I'm as pleased to get out of this place as ever you can be to see the back of me. As for that fat husband of yours, I wouldn't touch him with a pair of tongs. And as for yourself, I'd not remain a moment longer than I can help with one as doesn't know the meaning of truth, and would take an honest girl's character away out of pure spite and malice. And don't you dare," pursued Pamela, with a swelling voice, "say anything against my character, or as sure as there is justice in Heaven, I'll bring your business about your ears. I'll tell that old cat, my Aunt Lydia, what's happened, that you caught your horrid old Ildefonse ogling me in the glass, and that you haven't that trust in him—and sure, I'm with you there, for he ain't fit to be trusted the length of your apron, and so I tell you fair—you haven't that trust in him that you could have another moment of peace with me under your roof. God help you; I don't blame you! Give me the price of my ticket home, and I'll see Aunt don't get at you over the indenture."

For all her courage, for all the longing which the

thought of England brought her, the heart of Pamela Pounce was heavy as lead. She knew that, at the Kentish farm, things were going badly with the yeoman; she knew that she dared not add the burden of her penniless self to that which rested on his shoulders. She knew that odious as it would be, that abominably as her relative would abuse of the situation, there would be nothing for it, but to throw herself again on her Aunt Lydia's family feeling, as soon as the Dover coach landed her in London town.

Her aunt was now with her mistress in Hertford Street, back from the Wells, according to the latest reports, and that was one bit of luck; another was, that judging by the tone of the letter just received by Madame Eglantine with an order for hats, my Lady Kilcroney's maid was in the highest exultation over her mistress's royal promotion.

CHAPTER III

In which Miss Pamela Pounce, the Milliner's Assistant, becomes Arbiter of Life and Death in High Society

"*Pray Mrs. Tabbishaw,*" wrote my Lady Kilcroney's woman to the Mantua-maker in Cheapside, "*send Pamela along with those white feathers of her ladyship's, which you has, this ever so long, to be died blew, yours obleeged,*

"*Lydia Pounce.*"

Now the fact of Pamela being Lydia's niece did not endear her to that maturing damsel, "which," she was fond of remarking to any beholding them together, "do seem prodigious absurd, seeing as how there's scarce a year or two betwixt us."

But if Miss Lydia was not fond of displaying herself in public with a fine strapping young woman of twenty-three who had an inconsiderate way of dropping out "Aunt" at every second word ("which, reely, my dear, I vow she does a' purpose"—and perhaps indeed she did), my Lady Kilcroney's indispensable Abigail, as she never omitted informing all and sundry, had a remarkable sense of family feeling. She had placed the inconvenient niece with the matchless Eglantine. With such a start in life she considered the girl's fortune made; and if Paris were to become the stable abode of so much bloom and bumptiousness, she, for one, would continue to bear the separation with fortitude.

When, after two or three years' absence, however,

Pamela reappeared on the scene, extraordinarily Frenchified, unconscionably beautified, and quite unpardonably wideawake, having quarrelled to the death with Madame Eglintine, and possessing, to boot, only the clothes on her back and the price of her ticket, Miss Lydia Pounce was very justly annoyed. It was quite impossible to send the girl home, since bankruptcy threatened the Kentish farm. Once again Lydia's fine conception of family obligation came to the fore. There was Mrs. Tabbishaw, at whose second-rate establishment in Cheapside the elder Miss Pounce had been in the habit of having such odd jobs done for her ladyship as the dyeing and re-curling of feathers, the cleaning and mending of unimportant laces, the quilting of winter petticoats. Mrs. Tabbishaw owed her a good turn, and if she would now make room for Pamela, give her board and just enough wage for her clothes, Lydia would see to it that her mistress should go as far as to purchase an occasional hat.

Pamela had no choice but to fall in with her aunt's arrangements, for had not Madame Eglantine sworn that she would give her no character? (As if, indeed, it had been her fault that that odious Monsieur Ildefonse should take to ogling her behind Madame's back, and her staring into the mirror!) She knew very well, however, that she was sadly wasted at the poor, unmodish place; and, indeed, since Mrs. Tabbishaw was too stupid to realise the treasure that had come her way, the younger Miss Pounce was forthwith turned into a maid-of-all-work. Her long, clever fingers were set to scrub and to cook, to pink or to quilt, or to whatever odd job pressed the most. She was kept running to and fro with parcels, and up and downstairs on messages. She was sent galloping to shops and warehouses to match ribbons and velvets, and all the while the wives and daughters of the city went on purchasing the modes of the year before last, as interpreted by vulgar minds, while spirit, delicacy, art, dash, millinery, genius in fine, was actually within their reach! Not that Pamela Pounce had any desire

to adorn them. Her aspirations flew very high. Some day she meant to be as great in her line as Eglantine herself, to exercise her talents upon heads as worth while as my Lady Kilcroney's own.

"You're jealous of me, you cat!" It was thus she apostrophised the worthy Aunt Lydia in the solitude of her bare attic chamber. "You're jealous of me. You know you're an old maid and peevish, and I'm only twenty-three and better-looking than you ever were in your life, with twice your wits, though yours are as sharp as your elbows. You think I'd take the shine out of you, you lemon-faced thing! You know I'd toss up a bit of lace and feather for your ladyship's boudoir cap, and that her ladyship would nigh faint with the ecstasy of it when she saw herself in the glass. And a sweet pretty creature she is—the one glimpse I ever had of her, and that through the door, you mean thing! Ah, give me a chance, and I swear the sedans and the carriages would be blocking the streets to get at me. . But not if you can help it, old Miss Pounce! You're to be the only important Miss Pounce in this world; that's your little game! But 'tis not for nothing I've got it all in me!"

And hugging her knees as she sat on her bed—the chair being too rickety to bear her fine proportions—Miss Pounce the younger would map out her future in glorious processions of feathers and head-dresses, hats and bonnets, wreaths and *négligés*.

Through all the hardships, the dreary daily grind, the unkindness and the unremitting exertions, her star shone upon her with a light that never wavered. The first winter was a trying one, and Pamela found London, after Paris, a cruel, ugly place; a cruel cold one, and a cruel hard one. When the summer came, existence might be easier, but the hours were longer with the daylight, and there were nights when even Pamela's high heart gave way, and she would drop on her pallet bed almost too exhausted to sleep. She had grown thin, and there was a certain fierceness in the fire of her bright grey

eyes, as if they looked on all humanity as an enemy, by that July 16th, 1789, when my Lady Kilcroney's woman wrote for the "blew feathers."

"Oh, drat!" said Mrs. Tabbishaw.

She was just sitting down to her dinner at three o'clock in the afternoon of a torrid day. The reek of roast duck and sage and onions was succulently in the air, and there was a tankard of porter facing and winking amber bubbles beside her plate already.

"Drat!" Mrs. Tabbishaw took a gulp of the porter, and waddled to the door to scream: "Those blue feathers, where the deuce were they put? Pamela! Pamela! I say, where is that girl? My chest is wore out screeching for her. Where's Pamela, Miss Trotter, dear?"

"Just a-setting down to bread-and-cheese in the scullery," screamed a thin voice from the counting-house.

"Setting down! It's like her impidence! Send for her this moment, Miss Trotter. Tell her she's got to take my Lady Kilcroney's blue feathers to Hertford Street this very minute. Tell her it's pressing, Miss Trotter. And stay, look out my lady's bill, which Miss Pounce promised me to have settled this while back, and it twelve pound odd. Tell the chit to ask her aunt for it. I'm none too fond of letting fine ladies' bills run up, and it all for odds and ends that are scarce worth my doing. And, hark ye, tell her she'll have to hurry back too, with that pinking to finish to-night for Mrs. Alderman Gruntle's cradle, and her eleventh due any time."

* * * * *

"For mercy's sake, Aunt Lydia," said Pamela Pounce, as much to that damsel's surprise and annoyance she was ushered in upon her by Pompey, the black page. "Give me a bit of bread-and-butter, and a drink of Bohea, for I declare to Heaven I'm starving. And I've brought

you the feathers. And they're dyed a dreadful blue, I think; but once you give anything over to Mrs. Tabbishaw you get the mark of her paw upon it, and so I tell you."

"'Twould be well if she put the mark of her paw upon you, miss, for your impidence. Bread-and-butter, quotha! And I'm sure 'tis a good thing if you are a trifle fined down from the gross size you was when you came back from Paris. 'Dear me,' says my lord's new man to me, when he caught sight of you, 'that's a prize one! She'd make ten of you,' he says; and him so genteel, I blushed to hear him."

"Oh, that fellow!" Pounce the younger tossed her head; "waylaying me on the stairs to say I couldn't be a Pounce, being so—well, so vastly different from you, Aunt Lydia. And begging to see me home; as if I'd let him—a valet, indeed!"

"Upon my word!" Lydia's faded, sallow, pretty countenance went a trifle more sallow, and looked considerably less pretty. "Who's to talk of impidence, I'd like to know, and what do you expect, miss?"

"Somebody considerably less like stripes and buttons. If I don't get a gentleman one day, Aunt——"

"A gentleman? La, hear her!"

"I'll go single, like yourself."

Pamela's full light grey eyes became abstracted. Anon, as she had turned in at the area railings, a young gentleman had dashed by her up the steps, and had set the knocker thundering against the panels of the hall door. As she had looked up he had looked down at her; and then he had smiled, and made a little gesture towards his hat, which if not the courtesy he would have paid to one of his own class, was nevertheless a genial, pleasant salute. She thought she had never seen so handsome a countenance; come under the gaze of such flashing dark eyes. There would be a lad for one who was lucky enough to be able to go in at the front door!

"And, indeed, miss——"

Lydia wheeled round, and perceiving Pompey lingering, all one grin, tweaked his wool.

"How dare you, you little blackamore! What are you doing here?"

"He's waiting for orders to get me a cup of chocolate and a bit of cake, aren't you, Pompey?" cried the quite audacious Pamela. "I'm sure my Lady'll never miss it. And as soon as I've got it to give, I'll give you a crown-piece, Pompey."

She laughed on the little boy, and when Pamela Pounce laughed, she was something to look on; for her wide, fresh mouth curled so deliciously, and the corners of it went up so gaily, and she had such fine, white, even teeth, and as the dimples came and went, she gained such adorable little lines of fun about half-shut eyes, and the most engaging little crinkle in her cocked nose!

"La!" Mrs. Tabbishaw's slavey cast herself into her aunt's arm-chair, untied the ribbons of her wide straw hat, and flung it on the table. She ran her long fingers, surprisingly white in spite of their toil, through the roughened curls of her chestnut hair, stretched her long legs luxuriously, and contemplating the dust on her shabby shoes: "Thought I should have dropped, I did," she cried, "when I come into Shepherd's Market—three big feathers and two little ones, Aunt Lydia! And, la! the blue! 'Tis the peacockest vile colour, I ever—— And oh, here's my Lady's bill! And old Tabby must have it paid. She's all swears and spits and fur-flying about it, as it is. 'Get your aunt to pay,' she says, 'for her beggarly odds and ends that don't bring an honest body a bit of worth while,' and oh!" she yawned outrageously, "I'm to hurry back, no less, for Mrs. Alderman Gruntle's eleventh is waiting on my pinking."

"My lady's account!" Lydia snatched the written sheet from her niece's hand: "Of all the—there, that's

what comes o' dealing with them second-class shops. Mrs. Tabbishaw thinks my Lady can be treated like one of her City bodies, I declare."

"I'm not to go back without the money," said Pamela.

"Dear, to be sure! And my Lady so put about as never! What with her new hat being such a failure, and her out of sorts too, over her gown for the Birthday, she about to take up her first turn as Lady-in-Waiting into the bargain—Court friends being that spiteful, and my Lord having the ill luck at Whites, and Bellairs' young nephew, Mr. Jocelyn, an audacious, gaming, young rascal, if ever I see one, as set on the dice as my Lord, and him but a beggar, so to speak. And my Lady paying his passage back to India twice over, to my certain knowledge, and him losing it on the green cloth within the hour! Well, my Lady's done with him, that's one good thing. 'Tain't the moment for Tabbishaw, and so I tell you!"

"Why, la!" Pamela had a graceful, lazy mockery in her eye and voice which, however ill-placed in one of her humble station, somehow became her. "My Lord must have been, indeed, uncommon out of luck, if my Lady Kilcroney, her as every one knows is a-rolling in old Bellairs' money, can't pay twelve sovereigns to a poor shop in the City. But give me back the bill, Aunt, and I'll tell Mrs. Tabbishaw she's got to wait till my Lord casts a better tot."

Lady Kilcroney's maid gazed at her audacious relative as if deprived of speech. Nevertheless, in all her wrath there was a certain grudging admiration.

"The girl's as insolent as if she'd been born a lady!"

The thought flashed across her mind as she whisked through the door brandishing the account. On the threshold the power of language returned to her.

"As if twelve sovereigns wasn't as many farthings to one of my Lady's wealth!"

Here she nearly cannoned against Pompey with a tray, and bidding him wait to be dealt with till his hands were empty of chocolate, disappeared, objurgating, down the passage.

Pamela was half-way through her second cup of chocolate, vastly refreshed and comforted by it, and the agreeable little cakes which had accompanied it, when her relative returned, with a red spot on either cheek bone, her nostrils dilated over panting breaths. She had all the air of one who emerges from a wrestle. The light of battle, was still in her eye, but of battle victorious.

"Here, miss," she cried, "thirteen sovereigns to settle your Tabbishaw, and milady says you can keep the change. Gave me all sorts, she did, being, as who should know better than I, from early morning, my dear, in as peevish a temper as ever was. And—and what she can do in that way," said Lydia, turning up her eyes, "you'd never believe if you hadn't seen, the world being made up of Diddumses. There wasn't an item along here she didn't have her scratch at, and in the end, she says: 'For Heaven's sake stop talking!' (That's how poor servants is treated).

"'You'll have me reeling in the head,' she says. 'Take thirteen sovereigns from my purse, and get out of my room and don't let me hear another word of that there maddening bill!' And so you can keep the change, my love. And, if you'd believe it, just out of cussedness, the young gentleman what's annoyed her so prodigious has the boldness to come knocking at our hall door and demanding urgent, through Mr. Blandfoot, the butler, a few moments' conversation with her ladyship. My Lady having given orders that he was not to be admitted, the scamp sends for the butler—well, that's about dished him, I can tell you!

"'Tell him, Blandfoot,' says my lady, 'that I don't give alms at the door. Tell him,' she says, 'to go and earn his living. I don't hold,' she says, 'with able-bodied beggars!'"

"Oh," said Pamela, her thoughts flying back with compassion to the dashing young gentleman on the doorstep, "what a cruel thing to say. 'Tis insulting misfortune."

"Insulting fiddlesticks! Here, hasten, you baggage, or you'll lose your good place, and I've had enough of you for one day, I can tell you that."

"And what a darling, sweet auntie you are!" said the second Miss Pounce, as she tied on her shepherdess hat with knowing little peeps at the mirror. "'Tain't any wonder I love you. Ta-ta."

She dropped the sovereigns into her worn reticule, kissed her hand from the door in sarcastic farewell, and departed.

With fourteen shillings and twopence to the good in her pocket, Pamela felt a singular sense of independence. Instead of hurrying back into the heat, crowd, and toil of Cheapside, she turned her steps towards Hyde Park, the green boughs of which seemed to beckon to her from the top of the street.

"I'll go and sit under the trees," thought the girl. "An idea for a hat has come into my mind, and I'll work it out and let Mrs. Alderman Gruntle and her cradle and the pinking go to the deuce."

She found a retired spot in the shade, and, the turf being dry and inviting, stretched herself luxuriously at full length to stare upwards at the odd little triangles and stars of blue sky visible through the interlacing leaves above her.

Composing her hat with the zest of a poet his verses, she lay at ease, in great content, when she was startled by the sound of rapid footsteps on the sward.

She sat up and beheld a young man, a very fine and modish-looking young gentleman indeed, who advanced with great strides, brought himself to a sudden halt within the shady little dell, and, casting swift looks from side to side, as if to make sure he was not observed, flung his hat on the ground and stood staring.

Pamela, shielded from observation by a clump of bushes, watched with a sudden and inexplicable feeling of apprehension, which grew as she caught sight of a drawn countenance, deathly pale.

"For sure," thought she, "the poor gentleman's desperate!"

The next instant she sprang to her feet with a scream; he had drawn a pistol from his breast pocket and, with an odd jerk, almost as if forced by some malevolent power which he could not withstand, raised it to his temple.

Pamela was one of those rare beings in whom swift wits unite with swift action. She hurled herself upon the would-be suicide and wrenched the weapon from his hand. For a strange moment they stood facing each other, eye into eye. It seemed to her as if the whole world held nothing but those mad eyes of his, dilated, starting, haunted; the pupils were contracting and expanding in the violet irises as with some dreadful pulse of his heart. Suddenly his whole being relaxed; he smiled.

"Good heavens," she cried, "'tis the young gentleman on the doorstep!"

"And you," said he, "are the young lady in the area. If the next world's as odd as this, 'twill be a vastly comic place."

"Oh!" cried Pamela, who did not at all like this reference to Eternity. Still less did she like the manner in which he put out his hand towards the pistol.

"By your leave, my dear. My property, I believe?"

She strove to avoid his grasp; she fought to keep the weapon in her hand. "Why, what farce is this?" he exclaimed, laughing. "What do you imagine, my good girl? May not an actor practise his greatest scene without——? Why, what prodigious nonsense have you got into your pretty head? The things's not even loaded!"

"Ah, but what did you say yourself just now?"

She was a vigorous creature, and terror lent her strength. She remained in possession of the dangerous implement.

"What did I say? I merely tried the effect of my most telling speech upon you—with fine result. If my public are as impressionable——"

Once more he stretched out his hand, but, leaping from him, the girl raised the pistol, aimed at the nearest bush, pulled the trigger, and fired.

As the reverberations died away she turned a face, drained of colour but triumphant, upon him.

"So much for your story, Mr. Actor!" cried she.

"Why, you're too quick for me!" he answered, with a moody change, thrust his hands into his pockets, began to pace the dell backwards and forwards before her, kicking his hat each time he passed it.

She thought that he was no more than a boy, for all his manly growth, and her heart went out to him.

"Here, give me the pistol," he said. "Tush, child, 'tis safe enough for the moment. We'll be having the park-keeper upon us to see who's been murdered. Let us look innocent."

"Oh, oh," she shuddered, "if I had not been there!"

"Nay, my dear, I'm in no mood to thank you, I protest. Yet 'tis something to have had a vision of a pretty face and a kind, womanly spirit at the last."

"There you go again! Sir, sir!"

She surrendered the smoking pistol, and, as he slipped it into his pocket:

"Farewell, my dear," said he.

"Ah, no!" She clutched his arm by both hands. "You shall not go till you have promised me—promised me on your honour as a gentleman to spare yourself."

"I could do that, on my honour," he answered her; "but that I will not quibble before such true eyes.

Nevertheless it is to spare myself that I seek death. You bid me on my honour. 'Tis because I cannot live dishonoured that I hold this pistol to my temples. 'Tis not that I don't love life as well as another man, or better. 'Fore Heaven, it is because I have loved life too well. Had I as much as a guinea in my pocket I would have defied Fate. When I stood on those steps and rapped that knocker a while ago, I swear I had as little thought of blowing my brains out as you had. When you and I smiled at each other I thought this world a very good place, I do assure you. That woman in her fine house yonder, rolling in luxury, with her lap dog and her chocolate and her black page, her jewels and her laces, her silks and her satins; all in her cushions; that woman, I say, who finds the Bellairs' money of so vast a use to spend, might have given me a ten-pound note out of her store. When all's said and done, I'm the only Bellairs left. And, if but a nephew by marriage, nevertheless the last kin of her old Nabob. Ten pounds I asked of her —that contemptible sum! And what did I receive? The vilest insult, through the most insulting medium. Odds my life, when I think of it——"

He clenched his hands.

Pamela stood, reflecting profoundly, one needle-marked finger to her lip, her white brow drawn together under the shade of her hat.

Ten pounds to save a man's honour. It seemed indeed a strangely small sum! As if he read her thought, he broke forth:

"I dreamt last night, three times over, that I tossed a double six at tric-trac, and 'tis the sixteenth of July and I am twenty-six. My Lord Sanquhar promised to give me my revenge at the Six Bells at six of the clock. 'Twas such a conjunction of luck as could not fail. I would have won back my I.O.U.'s. I would have returned my Lady Kilcroney the passage money to India. She wants to ship me to India, my dear, the inconvenient poor relation. Ah, she need not fear. I shall beg from her no more.

What a farce it has all been! 'Tis time to put an end to it. Bless you for your sweet looks, my pretty child. Think of me only as one who, after life's fitful fever, sleeps well. Aha! I shall sleep better I dare say, than my Lady Kilcroney when she has read the letter I sent to her anon!"

"One moment, Mr. Bellairs, since that's your name," said Pamela Pounce, with her wide, lovely smile. She dived into her reticule, and began to gather the coins together with counting digits. "If you'll condescend to borrow of a person who goes in by the area gates, here are thirteen sovereigns at your service. I've just had a long bill paid me. And, oh," cried Pamela, suddenly and unexpectedly bursting into tears, "I wish they were three hundred!"

"Gracious heavens!" said the young gentleman.

"If you don't take them I'll never know another happy moment," sobbed Pamela. "Oh, how could I? Oh, sir, don't say 'No,' because I am just a poor girl."

"Nay then. I won't say 'No.' Upon my soul, I don't care if you go in at the coal hole, you've the finest spirit and the prettiest face, ay, and the warmest heart I've ever met in woman."

He held out his hand, and she put the money into it. He hesitated then, and looked at her; and perhaps because of some warning that flashed through her wet eyes, or perhaps because of some innate spring of good breeding in him, he only kissed the hand that had been strong to save him.

"Pray, what o'clock is it?" He struck his waistcoat, where a black ribbon made pretence for a missing watch. "My time piece has gone the way of most of my possessions."

"'Tis past five," she said, "by the shadows."

The country girl had not forgotten her lore.

"Past five," cried he, "and I due at the Six Bells! If you will move a step, my dear, I will pick up my hat."

"Allow me, sir," said she. "Hats are my business."

She lifted the felt from the grass, dusted it with her arm, pushed out the dent where he had kicked it, and gave each corner a perfectly unnecessary twist.

"I'm in the millinery," said she, as she handed it to him.

"I thought there was something remarkably elegant about your headgear," he observed. "And pray oblige me with your address, that I may know where to return my loan, for the conviction grows in me that I am destined to win and to live."

She knew that sense of victory; it was akin to the conviction of her own confident soul; but while she smiled she pondered. Then she said demurely:

"My name is Pamela Pounce, sir. If you will inquire for me, care of my aunt, Miss Lydia Pounce, own woman to my Lady Kilcroney, 'twill be the safest address."

He gave her a quaint look, bowed profoundly, and hurried away.

"The safest address," he murmured, as he went. "Ah, Pamela, you're one of the wise virgins!"

Then he laughed.

"Farce did I call it? And I set for the blackest tragedy! Nay, 'tis a mighty delicate comedy, and we're but at the first act of it."

Pamela stood gazing after the retreating figure.

"Now," said she to herself, "I have the choice of three roads. I must go—to Bridewell, to the river, or to Aunt Lydia. It had better be to Aunt Lydia."

"Stripes and buttons," who had not forgotten how the younger Miss Pounce had snubbed him on their first meeting, informed her that she might "hunt up the old girl for herself"; her ladyship having gone out her ladyship's woman, if not in her own apartment, might be found in her ladyship's chamber.

And here indeed, with a not altogether comfortably beating heart, Pamela confronted her aunt.

Lydia stared, as if beholding a ghost.

"La, whatever's to do?"

"The money's gone," said Pamela with great firmness.

She had made up her mind from the first that nothing should induce her to betray either the unfortunate young gentleman or her own rash interference with his concerns.

"Gone? Gone, miss?"

Pamela opened her reticule and mutely took out from it a vinaigrette, three pennies, a sixpence, and a pocket handkerchief, and showed the remaining vacuum to Lydia's horrified eyes.

"But how in the name of goodness could such a thing happen?"

"You lend me the money, aunt, and I'll pay you back faithful, and I'll trim you all your hats for three years for nothing into the bargain."

But with an action of little bony hands which typified her patronymic, Miss Pounce seized the reticule from her niece. She shook it, and tested it; she held it up to the light, she pulled its lining out. Then she tried the clasp, which fastened with a snap as uncompromising as that which now closed her own tight jaws.

Still, without speaking, she looked volumes at the milliner's assistant.

"I declare as I'm a living woman, aunt," asseverated the sinner, "that I have no more notion what's become of the gold than you have yourself. And all I can tell you is"—her courage rose with the sense of this perfect adherence to the truth—"that as I left this house it was jingling in that bag, and when last I looked there wasn't one left. And if you don't come to my aid—why, you know what Madame Tabbishaw is? She'll always say I stole them. Come, you'll lend me the money, I know you will, for father's sake, and the

name's sake. We Pounces ain't never been called thieves, aunt."

Her voice shook, for suddenly the word stung her, unrepentant though she remained.

"Lend you!" Miss Lydia let herself fall into my lady's own rosy-cushioned chair and broke into piercing remonstrance.

How in the name of goodness was she to find such a sum? Did Pamela think she was made of gold? Here was a return for all her kindness! A girl who was so wickedly careless—likely to keep her promises, indeed! She that ought to be racking her brains to pay back her dear auntie for all her sacrifices.

"Thirty pounds, miss, it cost me to send you to Paris, and you to be so unprincipled as to let Madame Eglantine's husband take to ogling you. And it's paying me back you ought to be, instead of having the brazenness to ask me for thirteen pounds. And indeed, miss, it's not thirteen pounds I'll give you; no, not a farthing more than the sum of the bill. You that might have had fourteen and tuppence!"

She suddenly broke off, sat up straight, and pointed a finger at her niece with a sharp throw.

"Where did you go to, miss, when you left this house? Straight, now! What? You went and sat under the trees in the park? Upon my word, I never! And how long might you have been a-sitting there? You don't know. Better and better. You went to sleep, miss, with that there bag full of gold. Oh, you——"

Pamela drooped her head, receiving the indictment as with the humility of a guilty conscience, though she was considerably relieved by the solution which the older Miss Pounce had found for herself.

Suddenly Lydia bounced out of her seat.

"Mercy on us, here's my Lady!" cried she. And then, with a scream: "Mercy on us!" she cried again. "What in the world has happened?"

Pamela stared. My Lady Kilcroney it was indeed, to judge by a fine feathered hat and a delicate flutter of muslins, but a vastly different Lady Kilcroney from the charming, happy little lady of Pamela's remembrance. A small figure with a stricken face crawled into the room, and, as Lydia rushed forward, nearly swooned against her.

" My Lady, my Lady, what is it ? " cried the maid in genuine concern, guiding her mistress's form to the chair she had herself but just vacated.

" Oh, oh, oh ! " moaned my Lady. " Oh, in the name of Heaven, send for my Lord ? Oh, Lydia, the letter, the letter ! "

Both women then saw that in a little gloved hand my Lady Kilcroney was clutching an open sheet. Lydia took it into her own grasp and glanced at it.

" Mercy on us ! " then cried she for the third time. " That dratted young man you've been so good to ! Well, if ever was anything so ungrateful ! To go and put an end to himself, just to spite you ! Never you take on, my Lady, he's no great loss, I protest. A good riddance, say I."

" Oh, oh, oh ! " Kitty Kilcroney sat up and wrung her hands. " Was ever any woman so punished for a fit of temper ? Oh, Lydia ! Oh ! I shall never smile again ! 'Twas my Lord being so late in yestereven from White's, mad-stupid with his losses. And, oh, the night I had, trying to show him the error of his ways and the vast folly of not letting bad be when the luck's against him. And him going off in a huff, God knows where, before I'd as much as swallowed my chocolate ! And Mrs. Mirabel's hat coming on the top of it, and it is a sight to frighten the crows after all my trouble. And my gown for Her Majesty's birthday the wrong yellow, and no time to get another ! And for the wretched boy to come to me then, with his horrid tale of the dice and the cards, as bad as my Lord's own, him without a farthing but my bounty !

Oh, oh, 'twas true I insulted him! What's that you say? *Who are you, pray?*"

She had dropped her cries of anguish to speak with the irritability of the afflicted.

"I am your woman Lydia's niece."

Pamela went down on her knees before the little distracted lady, and spoke very gently and deliberately as to a child; and the while she spoke Kitty's eyes widened on her smiling countenance as if they beheld an angel's.

"Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs has not committed suicide, my Lady Kilcroney, nor will he do so, because I took the pistol out of his grasp. Yes, my Lady, I, with these hands. And I gave him the thirteen pounds you sent me to pay Mrs. Tabbishaw's bill. Thirteen pounds! And he went away to gamble with them at the 'Six Bells,' and he was quite sure that he was going to win all his money back from Lord Sanquhar with the help of them, and I am quite sure, too, for him. Says he 'My luck is turned.' And——"

She was interrupted.

"And that's what happened to my Lady's money. Oh, you deceitful wretch! Oh, you vile young thief!"

Lydia forgot everything but her indignation. Her gimlet tones might have disturbed the dead, but neither my Lady nor Pamela paid the smallest heed to her, for Kitty Kilcroney had flung herself upon the young milliner's neck, and, shedding tears of joy, called her the most incomparable girl, the noblest creature, the nearest thing to a seraph that had ever walked a world of woe.

They were both as keen of wit one as the other, and it was wonderful how, with scarce a question and answer, the whole story came out.

"You turned into the park, you did not know why? Ah, but I know why! 'Twas Providence, child. A most merciful act of Providence! And you saw his desperate face? Oh, I can scarce bear it! You wrenched the pistol from his very hand? Oh, if I live to be a

hundred, how can I be grateful enough to Heaven and to you? Rash and unfortunate young man! You gave him thirteen pounds? He only asked me for ten. Oh, where did you say he had gone to? I must send after him. Lydia, bid the carriage round again. I must go myself. And you shall go with me, child. Oh, you shall indeed!"

"Since her Ladyship's in such a fine mood of generosity," cried Lydia, who occasionally presumed on fourteen years' service, "perhaps she'll pay Mrs. Tabbishaw's bill over again? Or else my niece will be getting into trouble, and she needn't look to me to get her out of it, lying to my very face!"

Kitty was standing before her mirror, happily setting her flounces into trim, like a ruffled bird its feathers.

"And why did you never tell me you had such a niece, Lydia, I should like to know? And what do you mean by burying a fine young woman like that with a creature like Tabbishaw? *Ugh!*"

My Lady's nerves were pardonably on edge. The shriek that escaped her as my Lord Kilcroney marched into the room was as piercing as Lydia's own.

"Good heavens, my Lord, you'll be the death of me! You should have married Susan Verney, you should indeed, or some one with a cast-iron constitution. Stay——"

Kitty's frowns were never of long duration, and she was in no mood for frowning! "You've come in the very nick of time, my dearest love. Do I not hear your coach without? Hasten, hasten to the tavern of the 'Six Bells.' Pray, where is it, my dear? Oh, doubtless you know, dearest Denis. And you will ask for Jocelyn Bellairs. You know, Denis, poor young Bellairs?"

"Faith, then, I've been beforehand with you, me darling!" said my Lord.

He was running Pamela's straight young figure up and down with the eye of the connoisseur as he stood there, a handsome, devil-may-care gentleman; one who patron-

ised so superlative a tailor, wore such fine lawns and laces, and had withal so monstrous elegant a frame whereon to hang them that a trifle of a loop hanging here or a button loose there merely pointed to a genteel carelessness.

"Faith, I've been beforehand with you! Meeting my Lord Sanquhar anon, he took me to the 'Six Bells,' where he had a rendezvous with your *poor* young relative, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs. And be jabers," cried my Lord, with his favourite Irish oath, "if that young rascal hasn't cleaned both me and my Lord Sanquhar as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard."

He paused; the investigating eye fixed itself with a guilty twinkle upon his Kitty's countenance, where a mixture of strange emotions were struggling for expression. And suddenly Lydia clapped her hands and broke into eldritch laughter. Whereat my Lady also made her choice of emotions, and laughed too.

"And troth, mavourneen," said my Lord, delighted to find the situation so unexpectedly agreeable, "I'm here to say 'twas you were in the right of it the live-long night. There's not a ha'porth of good in trying to force fortune when the jade has made up her mind to flout ye. And I'll take your advice, me darling, and go with you into the country the moment we get those devils of I O U's settled, till it's time for you to abandon me for that dashed damnation Court of yours!"

"Oh, I can't scold you!" cried his wife. "But, oh, why *did* you abandon me all day? 'Twas cruel unkind of you, and I dare swear if you'd been here 'twould never have happened; for you'd not see a fellow dicer go wanting for a ten-pound note, my Lord, if I know you! Oh, read that letter, Denis, and you'll understand. And if it had not been for Lydia's niece here, admirable girl! who took the pistol out of his very hand in the park, and gave him her employer's money—oh, if it were not for this noble, clever young woman, where should I be now?"

"You needn't worry about the bill, aunt," said Pamela,

with the perfect composure that compelled that person's disapproving admiration. " I gave your address to Mr. Bellairs, and, as he will certainly be punctual with repayment, her Ladyship will perhaps kindly allow me to remain until he calls with the money ? "

There was nothing my Lady Kilcroney would have refused Miss Pounce the younger at that moment, and the milliner's assistant proceeded to add to her obligations.

" If your Ladyship would trust me with the retrimming of Miss Mirabel's hat meanwhile, I make bold to say I could alter it to your satisfaction——"

CHAPTER IV

Showing Storm Within and Without

THERE are some who seem to be destined always to keep on top as the wheel of life revolves ; no matter how others may suffer from the law of its relentless motion.

My Lady Kilcroney (still in the minds of those who had first known her in her brilliant widowhood " Incomparable Bellairs ! ") might be counted among the rare ones who are thus miraculously favoured.

Beauty, wit, charm, wealth, rank and the irresistible dash of the born leader she had already possessed ; now she had attained to Court favour : she was Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Charlotte ! It is scarcely necessary to add that she had become a power in the world ; should she choose to exercise her influence on behalf of anyone clever and virtuous enough to profit of it, that person's fortune might be regarded as safe.

So do great planets, following their allotted orbits, carry in their wake lesser stars that bask and shine in a reflected light !

In the instance of Miss Pamela Pounce the luminary thus lifted into prominence, possessed a very considerable power of shining on her own account ; and, once her position in the hemisphere assured, she required no borrowed brilliancy.

In other words, my Lady Kilcroney's recommendation obtained for Pamela Pounce a new start in life. Madame Mirabel, exceedingly dissatisfied with her head milliner, aware that Madame Eglantine of Paris was growing sleek on the very cream of her rightful British custom, and

being moreover much struck with Pamela's genteel appearance, her manner and her aptitude, was all readiness to oblige so distinguished a client as my Lady Kilcroney, and give the young woman a trial.

Before the autumn of her disastrous summer had waned, the younger Miss Pounce found herself firmly established in the very position which had been the object of her wildest dream. She was head of the millinery department of the great Bond Street mantua maker.

Like her unexpected patroness, it might seem that her cup of happiness was full. But there is no factor in the calculations of existence so easily forgotten as that most important item of all; the human heart.

Pamela, in making her courageous plan of life, had forgotten to reckon with her heart!

And this tiresome, irresponsible, uncontrollable organ began to trouble her exceedingly. In those hours of leisure when she was not concocting delightful schemes for the breaking of other people's hearts—for every one knows what a killing hat will do—she found herself considerably inconvenienced by the peculiar conduct of her own.

Said Miss Polly Popple, of the millinery department, to Miss Clara Smithson, the book-keeper:

"You mark my words, my dear, there's something up with that young woman Pounce! She'll be getting herself into a regular scandal with that dashing young spark of hers! And if she ain't got something on her conscience already . . . I don't know the signs!"

Miss Smithson leant forward, wheezing heavily.

"Providence ain't always unjust, Polly," she said, "and people do come by their rights, no matter how many viscountesses is against them!"

"Ah," said Polly, swelling her fine bust, and looking at herself in the fly-blown glass which hung over the chimney in the little room at the back of the Bond Street shop where she was sitting, after hours, with her friend. "That was a bit of jobbery, that was! There isn't one

in the establishment, I do believe, that wasn't struck all of a heap when they heard that a strange young female was put into old Mrs. Dodder's place instead of me, which the next in rank is always, by law, you might say, entitled to. Lady Kilcroney being that prodigious in the fashion—not that I was ever one to admire her; give me breeding!—and Madame Mirabel being so set on cutting out Madame Eglantine—not that she ever will, and you mark my words, for London ain't Paris, I say, and that I'll maintain, and you may talk yourself blue in the face, Clara, and you won't alter that! If it hadn't been for that put-up job, 'tis I'd have been head of the millinery here this moment."

Miss Polly Popple's case was clear, but Miss Smithson's reasons for disliking Pamela were perhaps more abstruse. She talked big of the claims of friendship, of her sympathy for Miss Popple, and also of a "rising within her," which with her was an infallible sign of "something fishy" in somebody else. But the truth was that the new-comer's radiant youth, her success, her spirit of enterprise, had started the base passion of envy in Miss Smithson's withered breast; a passion the more prejudicial that it flourishes entirely outside the pale of reason! She listened very greedily, therefore, to Miss Popple's rapid exposition of her suspicions. Between gossip, malice, and inventiveness, the new head milliner's character seemed indeed in a parlous condition when Miss Popple concluded.

That wheezing breath of Miss Smithson's was drawn with ever-increased intensity.

"Walking with the young gentleman late of an evening in the Green Park! Upon my word! If it had been you that had seen her last night, now, Miss Popple dear, instead of that poor foundling of a Mary Jane, which Madame Mirabel was saying only yesterday could scarce be trusted to match a skein of blue silk, I'd go to Madame Mirabel this minute with it I would, being so to speak, a cousin——"

"Beware what you does, Miss Smithson, you'll ruin all. Give her rope."

"Rope, Miss Popple?"

"Rope to hang herself with," said Miss Popple vindictively. "That's in a manner of speaking. Plain, she'll give herself away or he'll give her away," she had an ill-natured giggle, "so as we give them time. It's his game to give her away, a devil-may-care hand, some young buck who only wants to have her at his mercy, just for his fun. Wasn't he after her here—open—three afternoons out of last week?"

"After her here?" Miss Smithson again repeated her friend's last words. She was exceedingly shocked.

"Why, mercy to goodness," she went on in horrified tones: "Ain't it the rule of the house? No male belongings is allowed after the young ladies here if they were grandfathers itself. And they churchwardens."

"Oh, tush, Smithson," interrupted Polly contemptuously. "Of course my sly young beau comes dangling in with some lady friend, to help her to choose a hat—*by way of*—" Polly winked. "Toosday, it was Mrs. Lafone as brought him, or, to be correct, he brought her, which, knowing the minx as I do—I refers here to Mrs. Lafone—'tis my intimate conviction 'tis he will pay for that there hat! But, as you knows, Miss Smithson, and none better, ladies' morals ain't our concern, thanks be, so long as we keeps our own respectable."

Miss Smithson admitted this regrettable truth with a doleful sigh. Polly took another pull at the brew of hot spiced beer which they had concocted for their comfort this cold December night, and proceeded:

"Thursday, if Mr. Stafford doesn't bring him along all innocent! He, with his handsome lady on his arm, up from Windsor for the day, to buy her a stylish head for a Christmas present. And, 'What are you doing, looking in at a hat-shop window, Bellairs,' says he, laughing and joking ('tis his way, my dear, a very agreeable

gentleman !) ' Gad,' says he, ' you've not got a wife to run you up bills ! Your chinkers goes hopping out on hosses and dice and cards, and what not ! Selfish fellows you bachelors are ! ' And Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, bowing to Mr. Stafford and declaring he only wished he had other people's luck—and indeed, Miss Smithson, Mrs. Stafford is a real beauty !—but all the while, my dear, who is he looking at and ogling and taking occasion to whisper to—but Miss Pounce, if you please ! And if I didn't see the way her kerchief lace was quivering with the palpitation of her heart, and her hands shaking as she took down heads for Mrs. Stafford and held them up for her—well, my name's not Popple."

Miss Smithson leant over the sulky coal fire and lifted the saucepan from the hob to refill her glass. Her own hands shook. That Pamela was a disgrace and would bring discredit on the whole house of Mirabel ! She felt it in her bones.

" You may say so, dear." As her friend drank, Polly Popple tendered her own tumbler for replenishment, murmuring parenthetically, however : (" Not a drop more, love. I never did hold with stimulants, only you were so pressing and it is a foggy night, I won't deny, and a drop of cordial, a mere medical precaution, so to speak)—you may say so," the slighted young lady of the bonnet department took up her theme with fresh gusto. " And you'd say so a million times more if you had seen them to-day. For Mr. Jocelyn comes in with my Lady Kilcroney—and oh ! the bold brazenness of it !—there he stands behind my Lady's chair and Pounce—La ! I declare I'd have been sorry for her if she wasn't what she is, the baggage—red and white and not knowing where to put her eyes with him signalling to her. Yes, and if he did not thrust a letter into her hand as I went out, you may set me down a liar. And her stuffing it into her kerchief under my very nose ! "

" Don't, dear, don't," moaned Miss Smithson, beating the air with her bony hand. Then, after a long pause,

during which she seemed to be painfully bringing her virginal mind to confront the awful pictures just presented to it, she went on acridly: "There'll be a bust up. When a girl comes to that *pint* of disreputableness things is bound to happen. It can't go on like this—you mark my words."

Now, strangely enough, barring the inexactitude of the premise, such a conclusion had just formed itself in Pamela's own mind.

It could not go on. Something was bound to happen. She had saved the life of Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs; and he had demonstrated his gratitude by promptly falling head over heels in love with her. So far, so good; or rather, so far, so bad, where a dashing young gentleman of expensive habits, small principle and remarkable fascination and a young person of the working classes are concerned. For the mischief of it was she had fallen in love with him. Poor Pamela, with her high spirit, her clear brain and her strong courage, to be betrayed by a heart as vulnerable as any silly girl's of the lot! She was clear-sighted enough to know that, stripped of the golden glamour, the path of her romance led to a very ugly gulf. She despised herself for her weakness. She had no illusions on the quality of the attachment offered to her by Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, but, as the short December days dropped away to Christmas, she found, growing within her, a dangerous new self; a reckless creature who cried: *The Devil might take the consequences; a girl was young but once; you found your fate, and had to clasp him or lose him; the one man you could love, and him only, or go wanting to your grave!*

"I know it's death and destruction some time," said Pamela to herself, sitting hugging her knees in the neat little chamber in Shepherd Street, where she lodged with a most respectable widow woman who had once seen better times, "but isn't it death and destruction anyhow and at once if I have to give him up?"

She re-read the letter he had slipped into her hand—

the audacious fellow—a few hours ago at Madame Mirabel's.

" It must be yes or no, my darling lovely girl."

My darling, lovely girl. That was what his eyes were always saying, and oh ! it was sweet !

It must be yes or no ! She told herself that if she couldn't say yes, it was still more impossible to say no. Backwards and forwards she struggled with the insolvable problem, till her tallow candle expired with a great stench, and she was left in darkness and misery. Worn out with her long day she fell at last asleep, to be wakened by the call of a cock in Shepherd's Market. Perhaps it was this farmyard cry which, weaving into her consciousness, had made her dream so strongly of the old place at home. When she woke she could hardly believe she was not in the billowing four-poster in the great attic, with pretty Sister Susie asleep beside her.

Again the cold, foggy, bleak London morning was rent by the crow of the cock. Then Pamela knew where she was, and she knew something else, too.

That other self which had got into her must not be listened to on any account. It must indeed be stamped out of existence with the utmost promptitude.

Now Pamela was considerably wiser than most young women in her position. She took a sensible resolution.

" I'll go to Mrs. Mirabel this very morning," she decided, " and ask for a Christmas holiday. She won't refuse me, being the good-natured soul she is, and me so useful to her. And once I get home and feel mother's arms about me—there ! I know I'll be all right. I needn't be afraid of myself any more."

Pamela Pounce took seat in the Dover coach. She was in a sedate flutter, an admirably dignified bustle. She knew to the fraction of an inch the amount of space to

which she was entitled, and she possessed herself of it determinedly. She had, besides her own agreeable person, divers bandboxes and loose parcels to place, and this she did with an amiable assurance that put protest to the blush, and set other passengers' pretensions in a gross light. When her arrangements were concluded she heaved a sigh, presented a vague smile, and lay back, her hands folded, to survey the other travellers at leisure. She was herself better worth looking at than any of the coach-load, which contained a foreign couple, one or two of the usual bagmen on the road to France, a Dover shopkeeper, a farmer's wife, and an elderly gentleman of delicate and serious mien, who drew an old calf-bound volume from a shabby bag, and fixed large gold-mounted spectacles upon his high, transparent nose with all the air of one prepared with solace for the journey.

But as he sat exactly opposite Miss Pamela Pounce, his shrewd, cold eyes wandered ever and anon from the print to fix itself upon her, as though—which was indeed the fact—he were puzzled in what category to place her. It was obvious to Sir Edward Cheveral, who, though impoverished, was himself a gentleman of the first water, that the ambulent nymph in front of him was not of his class, perfect as was the fit of her grey riding-coat, refined and reposeful as were the hands in their long grey gloves, tasteful in its coquettishness as was the grey riding toque, set on chestnut curls, and suitably as these curling tresses, unpowdered, were smoothed away to be tied with a wide black ribbon at the back of the long proud throat.

In the first instance, no young person of family with such claims to distinction as her elaborate travelling gear pointed to, would be voyaging in the public coach unattended; in the second, in her quiet ease, and the full yet not immodest assurance of her glance, the manners of one accustomed to fight the world for herself were very obvious; in the third, there was an

indefinable lack of the never-to-be-mistaken stamp of breeding.

"For all your clever conterfeit, my good girl," reflected Sir Everard, "you haven't the ring of the guinea gold."

Yet he reproached himself for the accusation. Here was, after all, no counterfeit; very good metal of its kind. "Fine yellow brass," thought he with a chuckle. "All in a good sense, my dear."

What was she? From whence and whither speeding? Not an actress. That fresh, close-textured skin had never known paint on its flower-like surface. The cheeks were not even rouged; indeed, after the flush of bustle, the colour of them was now settling back in a curious ivory pallor, which went well with the ardent hair. No fine lady's young woman; every movement had betrayed conscious independence. A shop-girl? The wife of some small merchant? Nay, 'twas the impersonation of maiden liberty, and what shop-girl could encompass such a wealth and detail of modishness?

She caught his gaze upon her, leaned forward and smiled. He had already noticed that her smile was rather dazzling. He quite blinked to find it addressed to himself.

"I trust, sir," said she, "my bandboxes do not incommode you?"

"By no means, madam," answered he civilly; and moved his long, thin legs back a further fraction beneath the seat.

"I haven't been home," said she, "for four years, and luggage do grow when one has five young sisters at home, sir, and presents run to hats."

"To hats?" he repeated, with that interested air that obviates the audacity of a question.

"Along, sir," said Miss Pounce, and her smile broadened, "with me being in the millinery business."

She drew herself up with a very pretty and, to his mind, becoming pride.

" A business," he said, " which I take it, madam, is in a flourishing condition."

" You may say so, sir." Her pride increased. " Since Miss Pamela Pounce—that's me!—has been made head of the department, Madame Mirabel can scarce execute the vast number of orders."

" Upon my word! " He had removed his spectacles, and was smiling on her in his turn in a kindly, detached, faintly satiric way. " I trust Madame What's-Her-Name recognises her debt to you? "

The head milliner gave her curls ever so slight a toss.

" Well, sir, she wouldn't like to lose me. She knows I'm worth my weight in gold to her."

His glance flickered over her comely proportions. Tall, generously made, he had called her a nymph. " Goddess would have been the better appellation," murmured he.

" Well, 'tis a comfort to an old man like myself to meet one so youthful to whom work is proving both fruitful and blessed."

Miss Pamela Pounce didn't need any old gentleman to commend her. She knew the value of work, and who better? And if it was blessed to her, why she took good care that it should be. And, as to content with her lot—sure, if she hadn't been, she wasn't a fool, she'd have picked out another for herself.

" 'Tis some old clergyman," she thought, and laughed. " He'll scarce know what a hat means. Clergyman's wives and daughters in the country would give any woman of taste bad dreams for a fortnight. There was Mrs. Prue Stafford. Had she not still to learn that to wear pink and blue with such cheeks as she had was positive vulgar? And she married to the finest of fine gentlemen."

Sir Everard folded his spectacles, put them carefully into his breast pocket, and closed his Virgil. Here was an opportunity of studying a—to him—hitherto quite

unknown branch of humanity, after an unexpectedly pleasant fashion. The girl pleased him. He had called her brass and humoured the simile. A shining, solid composition of metal that took a handsome polish and showed itself boldly for what it was. He liked her for her spring of youth, her frank pride of her trade, for having no petty nonsense nor poor pretentiousness to pass for what she was not. He liked her brave independence. There was, he thought, a better modesty in her quiet certainty than any prudish airs and graces could have lent her.

" 'Twould be a presuming fellow," he mused, " that would dare to try his gallant ways with such an one, and if he did, I would back my young milliner to teach him a lesson."

She told him how she had, so to speak, graduated in Paris, which accounted, thought he, for a taste that was scarcely indigenous. And her home was between Canterbury and Dover, and she, brought up till seventeen on the farm, the eldest of eleven. Then he knew whence she had drawn that sap of splendid vigour; a hardy flower of English soil. And the chief of his many prides being that he was an Englishman, he was still better content.

She would alight, she told him, at " The Rose " at Canterbury, where she would lie the night. And father would fetch her in the morning; for 'twas mortal cold across the downs on a winter's evening, and 'twas a long drive for the mare even in good weather.

" Bravo," said he. " I, too, halt at ' The Rose,' I am glad to know that I shall have such good company. May I sit beside you at supper in the eating-room, my dear young lady ? "

" Oh, you're vastly obliging, sir ! " said Pamela Pounce, and a faint pink crept, like the colour of a shell, into her smooth, pale cheek, for she had a good eye for a gentleman, and she knew that she was honoured.

Her tongue ran on gaily, and he listened with a gentle

air of courtesy and an interest which in truth was not assumed.

In spite of her sophisticated manner her chatter was very artless. It was a revelation of a character which had remained curiously untouched by the world. The busy mart in which she lived had cast none of its dust upon her soul.

Dear, to be sure, how prodigious joyful they would be at home to see her back!

"Four years, sir, think on it! I was but a child when I left them, and now I'm a woman!" 'Twas like, indeed, that none would recognise her again, should they just happen to meet, accidental like. She half wished she could have walked in upon them and taken them by surprise. But then: "Father, sir, would ha' lost the pleasure of coming to fetch me," and her mother might have been vexed. "Mother's very house-proud, sir. She'd want to have things pretty for me, and bake cakes and that."

And they'd all be looking out for her on the house step. Just to think of their dear faces fair turned her silly. She blinked away a tear and gave her bright smile. But as he smiled back it was with a certain melancholy. The farmer with his eleven children—poor, struggling fellow! —the hardworked mother, the good, industrious child, returning home with her hands full of gifts, blessed in her honest toil for them, were they not all about to taste joys from which he had deliberately cut himself off in his fastidious isolation? He had scarcely ever regretted his chosen solitariness. His beautiful old shabby home, set in the loneliness of the snowy park, the wood fire in the library in the company of a favourite book, the ministrations of a couple of well-drilled servants, an austere silence, a harmonious communion with the high spirits of the dead; that was the Christmas to which he himself had looked forward with complacency. Now he wondered; his heart contracted with a most unusual sense of pain; had he lost the best in life? If he had had a

daughter by his shoulder with a white, pure forehead such as this girl had, and had seen her eyes fire with love, heard her voice tremble at the thought of meeting him, her old father, would not that have brought him a sweetness finer than the most exquisite page in Virgil ?

The day, which had opened blue and gold, with a high wind and clear sunshine, began to gather threatening clouds by the time the posting station was reached ; and the " Dover High-Flyer " plunged away again into a snow squall with all the speed of its fresh horses.

" We are like to have a seasonable Christmas," quoth Sir Everard, and was pleased to note that, while the rest of the company grumbled and complained, the fine specimen of young womanhood opposite to him produced a warm shawl from a bundle, tucked it round her knees, and offered him the other end, declaring, with a smile, that she was as warm as a toast, and that she did love a white Christmas.

They all dined at Rochester, and had hot punch, of which Miss Pounce partook with enthusiasm, but in very discreet measure.

Conversation flagged on this, their last, stage. The snoring of the foreign pair who, having tied their heads up in terrible coloured handkerchiefs, leant against each other and gave themselves up to repose with much the same animal abandonment as that with which they had gobbled the beef-steak pie and gulped the hot rum of the " Bull Inn " at Rochester ; the sighing fidgets of the farmer's wife, and the grunts of her neighbour, the Dover tradesman, each time they jarred him from a fitful somnolence, alone broke the inner silence. Without, the multiple rhythm of the horses hoofs and the varying answer of the road to the wheels—now the scrunch of cobble stones, now the slushy whisper of the snow-filled rut, now the whirring ring of a well-metalled stretch—formed a monotonous whole which lulled to silence those who could not sleep.

Sir Everard saw, by the shifting flicker of the lamps, how pensiveness gathered on the bright face opposite him. Once or twice the girl raised a finger to the corner of her eyelid as if to press back a rising tear ; sighs lifted her bosom.

" Ah ! " thought the old philosopher, " the goddess of modes is not so fancy free as I had thought. Here, truly, are all the signs of a gentle love tale. Perhaps the young man in the counting-house, or some sprightly haberdasher, who sees Miss pass to her work, and would fain capture for his own counter a face so fair and charming."

Sir Everard felt very old and stiff by the time Canterbury was reached, and half regretted his suggestion to his travelling companion, to continue their comradeship at supper. He thought it might have better become his years and aching bones to retire into a feather bed with a basin of gruel. Far indeed was he from guessing the singular emotions into which his old age was destined to be plunged that evening.

A fine room with a four-poster, no less indeed than the chamber which went by the name of " Great Queen Anne," this was what the landlord proposed to allot to Sir Everard. A chimney you couldn't beat in the kingdom for drawing, mine host averred, and a fire there this minute ; agreeable to Sir Everard's obliging communication. And what could he do for Miss ?

Sir Everard was a little shocked to hear Miss Pounce enter upon a brisk bargain for an attic, and hesitatingly began a courteous offer of his own apartment, when she interrupted him with the valiant good sense which he had already had cause to admire in her.

" Not at all, sir ! 'Tis what suits my station—so long as the sheets are clean and there's a good bolt to the door ; you'll promise me that, Mr. Landlord ? And if you can't spare a warming pan, sure a hot brick will do

vastly well. And now, sir, give me time to see my band-boxes in safety, and I'm for supper."

Even as she spoke she started. Her eye became fixed, her lips fell open upon a gasp of amazement. The healthy white bloom of her countenance turned to deathly pallor, and then a tide of blood rushed crimsoning to her forehead. Beholding this evidence of strong emotion, it scarcely needed the sight that met Sir Everard's glance as he followed the direction of her eyes to confirm his instant conclusion. The young man, of course! Stay, the young man is a gentleman—poor nymph! Here then were joy, and fear, confusion, the warning of conscience, and artless passion, all mixed together.

The young gentleman advanced; a fine buck, of the very kind, thought Sir Everard, who took an instantaneous dislike to him, to turn the head of any girl beneath him in station, whom he might honour with his conquering regard. There was a black and white handsomeness about his chiselled countenance; all the powder in the world could not disguise that those jet eyebrows were matched with a raven spring of hair. With a smile, a dilation of nostrils, a swagger of broad shoulders, a leisurely step of high-booted legs, he came forward out of the tap-room. No surprise on his side: my gentleman had planned the meeting.

"La, Mr. Bellairs!" Pamela Pounce exclaimed, and her voice trembled. Then she rallied, and strove to pursue with lightness, "who ever would have thought of seeing you here?"

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips with an exaggerated courtesy, as if he mocked himself for it the while.

"Why, did I not guess rightly, my dear, you would be spending a lonely evening here on your way home?"

"Oh, Mr. Bellairs!"

He kept her hand in his, to draw her apart. Sir Everard, gazing at them, his chin sunk in his muffler,

with severe, sad eyes, saw how she swayed towards him, as she went into the window recess, as if her very soul floated on the music of his voice. He watched them whisper ardently together, and then she went by him like a tornado, picking up her band-boxes as she passed, quite oblivious of his presence, or of anything, apparently, save the young rascal, so Sir Everard apostrophised him, who stood gazing after her with the same insufferable smile; the smile of the easy conqueror.

Sir Everard never had had a high opinion of women. Life had given him no reason to indulge in illusions. But now all his condemnation was for the man. The strong, self-reliant creature who had faced him all those weary hours with such unalterable good-humour, such a candid outlook, such a pleasant acceptance of her own position that it was the next thing to high breeding, what was this Captain Lothario planning to make of her? And how, since he had found her already so hard to win that he must travel to Canterbury for the purpose, did she now thus readily yield herself to his plucking hand? Ay, the villain had struck at some peril point in the life of her soul. The child was tired after her long journey; tired too, perhaps, by the mental conflict from which her integrity had hitherto emerged triumphant. A sudden assault had found the fortress unprepared. 'Twas the old story!

Sir Everard went wearily to his room. The thought of the feather bed and the gruel, of a selfish withdrawal from further association with what was like to end in sordid tragedy tempted him perhaps, but he did not yield to it. The girl's smile haunted him. It had been so brightly innocent; and he was haunted, too, by the last memory of her face, stricken with astonishment, quivering with joy. However she might fall, it would not be through light-mindedness. The folly, the misery, was deep rooted in her poor heart.

He made a careful toilet, and went down the slippery oak stairs, leaning on his gold-headed cane, looking a

very great personage indeed, delicately austere and nobly haughty.

Alas ! Pamela never so much as lifted her radiant head when he came into the eating room. She was seated beside her gallant at the end of the table in close conversation — that whispered, blushing, laughing, sighing conversation of lovers—and if the roof had fallen over them, Sir Everard thought, the two would scarce have noticed it, so absorbed were they in each other.

The young man had ordered champagne, and the girl's glass was filled, but the bubbling wine had barely been touched. Another intoxication, more deadly and more sure, was working through her veins. The old philosopher, seeing her condition, resigned for the moment all thought of interference, and sat down to his bottle of claret and bowl of broth.

Hardly, however, had he broken his hot roll, than the room was invaded by fresh arrivals ; a young woman, wrapped in furs, conducted by a gentleman who had not removed his travelling coat, and kept his hat pressed on his brows ; a personage who entered with an intolerable arrogance as if the place belonged to him, who ordered champagne and supper for the lady, and fresh horses for his coach, in a voice which rang like the crack of a whip. He could not wait ; the servers must bustle. A guinea each to the ostlers if they harnessed within ten minutes. " And, hark ye, sirrah, a bottle of your best Sillery, and——"

" Surely I know this autocratic fellow," thought Sir Everard, and as the traveller drew his companion with an imperative sweep of his arm about her, to the end of the table opposite to that at which Mr. Bellairs and his Dulcinea were seated. " My Lord Sanquhar ! " cried Sir Everard, " by all that's outrageous ! And who in the name of pity is his victim now ? "

That the two were lovers, of a stage considerably more advanced than the poor milliner and her Beau, was

obvious to the onlooker, and as my Lord Sanquhar now tore his hat from his head, to dash the snow that covered it into the fire, where it hissed and spluttered like a curse, the young woman who accompanied him let herself fall on to the settle and turned a look of darkling challenge, of brooding suspicion, into the room.

She was clad in the most sumptuous garments. There was a bloom of royal purple against the tawny clouds of her sables. There was a fire of ruby at her throat, caught up and repeated at each ear, as if deep gouts of a lover's blood had taken to themselves flame for her adorning. But the countenance she turned upon the room was, Sir Everard thought, so striking, that all this splendour seemed its natural attribute; striking with a Spanish beauty, a richness and depth of colour, with flashing orbs, high nostrils, and scarlet lips.

"Good Heavens!" Sir Everard mused, "where has he picked the jade? Victim? Nay, 'tis the kind that keeps a knife in her stocking and will whip it out and under your rib, and make an end of you with less ado than another will shed a tear. My Lord Sanquhar will have to look out for himself. Illicit love is a dangerously charged atmosphere in which to handle live gunpowder."

The "Dover High-Flyer" had only dropped two of its passengers at "The Rose," and the landlord was free to attend to his imperious guest. He himself served my Lord Sanquhar's champagne, and with bent back received his "pishs" and "pshaws" on the dearth of proper entertainment for the lady. She wanted fresh fruit, and there was none. She asked for chocolate, and pettishly refused to touch it. One sniff was enough. All her desires and denials she communicated in a guttural undertone to her companion, who translated them into oaths.

Sir Everard, who had had but a poor appetite, was now, his broth bowl pushed on one side, dipping bits of roll into his wine after a foreign fashion, and watching

the while the two sets of lovers at the further end of the room. He noticed, not without some satisfaction, that constraint had fallen upon the ardent Bellairs and his fair milliner. The colour on the young man's face fluctuated. He bit his lip and shot doubtful looks of question from the blatant couple to the downcast countenance of his companion, who had grown very pale, scarcely spoke, and seemed now and again as if she was struggling with tears.

A clatter of hoofs, the clang of a bell, and a shout from the door announced another guest, a solitary horseman, it seemed. The landlord, who was just entering the room with a plate of dried plums in the hope of tempting the appetite of the capricious lady—he had scented my Lord's quality with unerring nose—here thrust the dish into the hands of a waiter and turned back to receive the newcomer. He had left the door open behind him and all could hear the passionate explosion of a hoarse voice in the hall.

The dark little lady on the settle by the fire sprang to her feet, and stood, tense. Her companion gave a swift frowning look of surprise. Sir Everard, gazing upon her also, drew a quick breath. " By the immortal gods," said he to himself, " the drama is coming swifter than one could have imagined." And, indeed, what the ancient quiet inn was destined to hold for the next ten minutes in the way of human passion, conflict, and tragedy, might happily be never as much as guessed at in the lifetime of most men.

The landlord, his wig awry, his features discomposed, puffing and blustering, was vainly endeavouring to prevent the ingress of a small thick-set man, who though wrapped in a cloak and carrying some considerable burden, which he kept hidden under its folds, contrived by a single violent thrust of his shoulder, to send him spinning out of the way. The intruder advanced then at a headlong run, brought himself up short, flung back his cloak, and with the same gesture his hat, and stood

revealed, swarthy, grizzled, livid, panting through dilated nostrils, glaring upon the woman by the settle. There was a great flare of colour on his broad chest, where, wound in a scarlet shawl, a little child of about two, with a head of curls of that dark copper hue destined to turn black with years, lay placidly asleep; the curve of a plump apricot cheek was all that was visible of its face.

"Good heavens," said Sir Everard, and at the sight of the sleeping innocence, something in his old heart began to lament.

There was a moment's extraordinary silence, broken only by the breathing of the man with the child, which hissed through his set teeth like the strokes of a saw. Then my Lord Sanquhar laughed.

The man leaped as if he had been struck. A torrent of words broke from him—guttural, fierce, intolerably anguished. Sir Everard knew a little Spanish.

The unfortunate was pleading: "Come back, come back! I will forgive all. Come back, Dolores, you cannot leave us. You cannot leave the little one. Come back in the name of God, in the name of His Holy Mother. *Madre di Dios*, look at her! You cannot leave that! Ah! unhappy one, you want gold and jewels. Was not our love your treasure? Is not our child a pearl? Look at her!"

In singular contrast to the unrestrained violence of his outburst, the manner in which he held out the child was pure tender. The little one woke, stared about her with devouring black eyes of amazement, caught sight of the standing woman's face and cried, joyfully beating the air with minute dusky hands, "Mamma, mamma!"

At this a sob burst from the unhappy father, so deep and tortured it was as if it rent him.

"Dolores, our little girl, she calls you 'Mamma, mamma!' Call again my angel! Mamma, mamma!'"

He went down on his knees and held out the babe, and as he did so she wailed.

The mother, meanwhile, stood, insolent lids half closed, red lips thrust forward, tapping the floor with impatient foot, the embodiment of cruel disdain.

At her child's cry she stuffed her fingers into her ears with savage gesture, stamped, and flung a raging glance at her lover as one who said, " How long am I to endure this ? "

He answered it by the movement of a beckoning finger, which brought her to his side. Then he cast a gold piece on the table, clapped his hat on his head, and together they moved towards the door.

" Ah ! By the blessed saints ! "

The Spaniard in a bound was before them. He shook the screaming infant in their faces as if it had been a weapon.

" I swear this shall not be. I swear that I shall kill you and your paramour and the child and myself rather than that this shall be."

It was here that Pamela caught the little one from him. He was perhaps too far gone in passion to notice the action ; perhaps he was glad to have his hands free for his fierce purpose—anyhow, he relaxed his hold. And the girl, clasping the baby in her arms, hushing it and soothing it, ran with it to the further end of the room. Sir Everard had also risen and Bellairs had started forward. But it would have been as easy to baulk a wild cat of its leap as to arrest the betrayed husband in his spring upon his betrayer.

No one ever quite knew how it happened. There was the flash of a knife, an oath, and my Lord Sanquhar's " Damn you, you would have it ! " and the explosion of a pistol.

The Spaniard fell without a groan, right across the doorway. Sir Everard and Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs both knew that he was a dead man before he touched the ground.

" You are witness all," said my Lord Sanquhar, " that this was in self-defence."

The woman cast a backward glance into the room. Her rich bloom had faded. She was white, but with a palpitating whiteness as of fire at its intensest, and the gaze of her great eyes was as fire too. Almost red they shone, repeating the blood fires of the rubies. Then she gave herself to Lord Sanquhar's embrace, and together they rushed out into the night.

"Odds my life!" said Mr. Bellairs, looking up at Sir Everard. He had flung himself on one knee beside the stricken man, and was going through the vain parade of seeking for a pulse which he knew no longer beat. "Did you see that, sir?"

"He lifted her across her husband's very body! He lifted her right across the body?" said Sir Everard, in a hushed voice of disgust.

"Lifted her? Sir, she jumped!"

Pamela kept the child's face turned against her breast with a loving hand, and as she rocked and soothed, she herself wept as if her heart would break.

Through the doors, cast open to the night, the roar of a new snow wind hurtled in upon them. There followed a sudden clamour of voices, as the host endeavoured to arrest my lord's departure and was borne down, well-nigh annihilated, from his path; the crackling shout of my lord's orders; the plunge and clatter of hoofs on the cobbles. It seemed as if the blood-guilty pair had gone on the wings of the storm, and that the very elements cried after them as they went.

Sir Everard, as the most responsible witness, assisted the landlord in the preliminary investigation of magistrate and constable. He took a certain grim pleasure in furnishing Lord Sanquhar's name, and trusted the nobleman might be summoned to answer for his action. Even if acquittal were a foregone conclusion, to a reputation already tarnished this incident was not likely to add a lustre. By the quality of the murdered man's clothes, the massive gold of his watch-chain, the signet ring on

his dead hand, it was judged that he was a merchant of the better class, and that the unfortunate incident would probably make some stir among his compatriots.

The cold and stiffening body which had been so short a while before pulsing with agony and passion, was laid in the harness-room of the inn, covered with a white sheet. Scarce ten yards away the grey horse that had borne its rider on the wild race to death was placidly munching its corn, the sweat not yet dry on its flanks.

When Sir Everard returned to the eating-room he found Pamela still on the settle, the child asleep on her lap. On the board beside her a half-finished bowl of bread and milk showed that she had been occupied with the worse than motherless babe, while he had attended to the last concerns of its doomed father. On the other side of the hearth, one elbow propped on the high mantelshelf, stood Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs. The old man's entrance had evidently interrupted a conversation between the two lovers, of an interest so vital that both the faces now turned upon him were stamped with fierce emotion.

Sir Everard removed a chair from before the table and sat down on it facing the fire, and for a space no one spoke.

Pamela had cast the scarlet shawl across one shoulder so as to shade the child's head from the light. Her hand patted and her knees swayed, rocking the infant sleeper.

"Poor little creature!" said Sir Everard at last.

The girl gave him a quick glance.

"I'll keep her to-night. I've told the landlord I would, and I'd keep her always if I could."

"'Tis a generous thought," said the old gentleman, with a faint smile for the magnanimous impractibilities of youth, and as he smiled he was aware that Mr. Bellairs snapped his fingers and jerked his foot on the edge of irritable outburst.

Suddenly Pamela began to sob quickly under her

76189

breath, turned her head aside so that her tears should not fall on the little placid face.

" I've been a wicked girl ! A wicked girl ! "

" Hush ! " cried Mr. Bellairs, and flung out his hand.

" No, sir ; I won't be silent ! "

" But, good God, my dear, need you drag this stranger into our intimate concerns ? "

" He's no stranger to me, Mr. Bellairs. We travelled down in the coach together, and he couldn't have been more civil to me if I'd been a lady born ; no, nor kinder if he'd been my father. Oh, sir, I don't know your name, but I know by the pitying way you looked at me that you understood what dreadful danger I was in and how—" again she sobbed—" how ready I was to yield to it ! He wanted me to go to Paris with him. He did, indeed ! He wanted his love to be my all-in-all, and nothing else was to matter. I've been a wicked girl ! I listened to him. I never would listen to him before—not when he spoke like that—but to-night I did. Heaven forgive me ! What took me ? "

" Confound ! " said Mr. Bellairs.

He wheeled away from the sight of her weeping, clutched the mantelpiece with both hands, and dropped his head on them.

" Well, 'tis all over now."

Sir Everard spoke uneasily. This openness upon a subject so delicate was painful to him, but Pamela had the yearning to relieve herself by confession.

" Oh, sir, how could I do it ? I don't know myself. I swear when I look back 'tis as if I had not been myself at all. Something came into me—so rash, so desperate ! 'Twas as if nothing mattered but just his love, our love. And then—then—when those two came in I saw our sin as it was. Oh, heavens ! Oh, Heaven forgive me ! Murder and every evil was there. Would I not have been just as cruel, done just as horrid murder ? When the truth came out, would my father and mother and my own dear loves at home, waiting for me so fond and so trusting,

and so proud of their poor, silly Pam, ever have held up their heads again? Oh, base, base! I would have murdered them for my pleasure. And that love, what was it? The thing that those two looked at each other, something vile, something that brought contamination even just to see go between them. Did he and I look at each other like that? It turned me sick even to think on, even before—before that poor, poor man came in! Heaven forgive me! Heaven strike those two in their bad hearts! Oh, sir, did you look at her when she stared back upon us, that woman? I suppose there was beauty in her face; I suppose he who went with her thought her handsome airs worth the cruelty and the blood and the crime on his soul. But to me she was ugly, all ugly, with the ugliness of her sin——"

She broke off, bit her quivering lip, and stared fixedly before her; an expression of horror on her countenance as if she still beheld the ugliness of which she spoke.

Mr. Bellairs straightened himself and snapped his fingers again.

"Tall talk, my dear," he began; and then broke off, dropped his eyes under Sir Everard's stern gaze, and stood abashed. Then: "Perhaps you're right," he said in an altered, strangled voice; and dashed from the room as if driven.

Pamela started, glanced after him, and then wiped her wet cheeks with the end of the baby's shawl.

"Let him go," she said.

"You're a brave girl."

"Oh no, sir! Only so grateful, so wonderfully saved, so ashamed. Oh, this little creature against my breast—must I not feel it—think of it—if I had had my foolish way I should never have been worthy to hold such a lovely, lovely little dear in my arms again."

* * * * *

Sir Everard insisted on lighting Pamela to her attic chamber. She went up before him with a step so elastic,

in spite of the burden of the child in her arms, that she had to wait for him on every landing; which she did with a return of her bright amiability and even a flicker of its former radiance in her smile. Each time she halted she rocked the baby, swaying from foot to foot, murmuring under her breath a crooning song which the old man thought very sweet; so sweet indeed, that, with a swing of memory's pendulum it brought him back to his own childhood's days and the tender face of his mother, long dead—a mother who had never been old like him.

On the threshold of her poor room they parted. She spared him her right hand for a second from its motherly caressing and patting of the child which she bore with such ease on her left arm. He bowed over it as if it had been his queen's.

When he went down to the flaming hearth which justified the landlord's boast, he sat long by it.

He, who had hitherto lived apart in a world of books, found his mind obsessed by the thought of the frightful passions of humanity as they had this night played themselves out before him.

The whole scene reproduced itself in his tired brain with the colours of life; Lord Sanquhar's sardonic, pale, haughty face, the rich vividness, the unblessed allurement, the cruel beauty of the unfaithful wife; the Spaniard's agony; the irredeemable tragedy of that picture of the father with the child; then the dead face.

"Heaven strike their bad hearts!" had cried Pamela in her honest revulsion. Could God ever forgive those who had sent forth the soul of their victim so charged with fury and despair that even death could bring no peace to his brow?

And then he thought of Pamela's face as he had last seen it—pale, tear-stained, but with the old luminous innocence. And, after all, he thought, there had come good out of the evil.

"The providence of God is over us all," he thought with gratitude, as he rose stiffly to seek that feather bed,

where there was small likelihood of sleep that night for him.

He heard the call of a coach horn beyond, in the night, and immediately afterwards the mighty clatter of the four sets of hoofs and the rush of the wheels in the streets. He went to his window, opened it, and looked out.

The up coach from Dover, pausing only to drop a single passenger. Stay, to take up a passenger, too. Sir Everard recognised the swing of the shoulders, the tall, alert frame, the indefinable swagger, even though muffled in the many-caped travelling coat.

Young Bellairs was not going to Paris with a fair companion!

"Thank Heaven!" said Sir Everard.

CHAPTER V

In which Miss Pamela Pounce Demonstrates the Value of Virtue to her Family and her Friends

"And I'm sure, my dear," said Mrs. Pounce, the tears welling in her eyes as she gazed lovingly at her eldest daughter, "'tis the golden girl you've been to us!"

"Ah, you wait, mother!" cried Pamela. "Just you wait! If I don't finish paying off that there mortgage with the new spring fashions, call me Tabbishaw, that's all I say."

The force of condemnation for vulgar stupidity could go no further on Miss Pounce's lips.

Farmer Pounce, seated before the kitchen fire, turned his big, grizzled head to cast a glance no less affectionate than his wife's upon the good daughter.

"This time last year," he said; then, in a ruminating voice, "ah, 'twas a black look-out! As much as I could do to squeeze the interest on the borrowed money and the expenses of the new loan. And Sir Jasper, with his eye on the farm this long while, turning the screw on me, he and lawyer Grinder between them. Cruel hard terms they made me, cruel hard, but there, 'twasn't as if I didn't know their little game. Aye, aye, they were but waiting, the both of them, to sell me up and get me out of it all; the land my father's father's father called his own."

Mrs. Pounce wept at the mere recollection. Where would they have been, they and the little ones, but for the golden girl?

Pamela winked away a bright tear of sympathy.

Everything about this girl was bright; the spring of her chestnut hair from her white forehead, which itself shone as with a kind of luminosity, the glance of her full, shrewd eyes, the smile that curved her lips. Oh, above all, it was Pamela's smile that was bright with the gaiety and joy of life!

"Pish, you dears," she said now, and covered up her emotion with just one of those flashing smiles. "Don't be making too much of it. All those months I wasted at old Tabbishaw's didn't I know in my spirit it would all come right? Wasn't I sure the whole time"—she played with her capable fingers in the air—"that there was a fortune in these hands once I could get them proper to work. And I tell you now, without vanity—oh, I ain't got a mite of vanity about it, 'tis my gift, the way pigs is father's gift—give me a yard of ribbon, a feather, and a bit of straw, and I'll turn you out two guineas before you can say 'knife.'"

"Dear, to be sure," mused Mrs. Pounce, forgetting to knead her scones. "And think of the Christmas dinner we've had. A turkey fit for the Queen's table, though I says it as shouldn't. And me having to sell every one of my lovely birds last year and keep father on the salt beef, Christmas and all! And there's Susie, such a picture in the bonnet you trimmed for her, at morning service, that I'd never be surprised if Farmer Fleet's son were to come to the scratch to-night at Sir Jasper's barn dance, I shouldn't indeed."

"I've got a white cambric, mother, and blue ribbons ready for her," said Pamela, smacking her lips with gusto, "and a Shepherdess Dunstable. If that don't settle him! 'Tis the very thing, so simple and fresh, a sort of daisy-gown, father and mother, that'll start Master Tom thinking o' dairies and the clean linen and the white flour in the bin; and, 'What a modest, nice girl,' he'll say, 'The very wife for a farmer. No nonsense of cheap finery. Only what a maid could buy for herself and stitch at home,' he'll think, poor innocent, and it's the model for

the French Queen at Trianon, where she plays at milk-maid, you'd never believe ! "

" Mercy on us ! " said Mrs. Pounce, with an uncomprehending stare. " Frenchies be queer people, to be sure."

" And Jenny and Betty shall wear the sprigged muslin," pursued Pamela. " And my little pet, Peg, the robe-coat I made her out of the odds and ends Madame Mirabel gave me from her ladies' counter."

" And what will you wear yourself, my dear ? " asked the mother, cutting her rolled-out paste into neat rounds.

" Is it me, mother ? " Pamela hesitated. Then : " I don't mean to go," says she.

" Not mean to go ? " screamed the farmer's wife, blank disappointment writing itself on her good-humoured countenance.

" Tut ! tut ! " cried the farmer, and wheeled himself round in his chair.

The London girl coloured, and a shadow came over her face.

" Some one's got to stay at home and look after little Tom," said she stoutly, " and him but ten months old, the poor fond lamb ! "

She glanced at the wooden cradle to the left of the hearth, where, under a patchwork quilt, a chubby miniature reproduction of the farmer was lying, with fists clenched in a determined fashion, as if he defied anyone to rob him of his repose.

" Why, I never heard such nonsense ! " Mrs. Pounce gathered the cuttings of paste together and dabbed them into a single lump with an irritable hand. " And who's minded little Tom, do ye think, all the hours, miss, that I've got to be butter-making, plucking of geese, and cutting up pig for the salting ? Who but old Nance, my love, who looked after yourself when you was no bigger than the little 'un there ? "

" She's getting very old," said Pamela. " I caught

her nodding yesterday with the Blessing on her lap, and he as near as anything into the cinders. Besides, my mind's made up, and there's no use your trying to unmake it. I've my reasons, and that's all there is to it."

"Why, Pam, why, lovey"—Mrs. Pounce had a grimace like an infant about to cry—"you fair break my heart. Why, 'twas all my thought, these days and days, how I'd let neighbours see what a beauty my dear, good London da'ter be, and as elegant as any lady!"

"If you've got a reason for disappointing your mother, out with it, girl, so it's a good 'un," said Farmer Pounce, with some sternness.

Pamela tossed her head. She was never one for making mysteries.

"Well, father and mother, if you must know so particular, wasn't that Sir Jasper Standish as was driving the high curricle away from Pitfold Church this morning? The stout gentleman, with the kind of red eye, and it rolling?"

"Aye, aye," grumbled the farmer, "the very man, my dear, and a hard gentleman he be. And queer tales there are about him. 'Tis a good thing he comes to Standish Hall but seldom. Aye, aye, 'twas him driving them bloods in the curricle. And a mort of fine ladies and gentlemen in the barouche. They'll be staying Christmas, I reckon."

"Aye," corroborated Mrs. Pounce. "A twenty-pound jar of my best salt, and six turkeys, no less, not to speak of the geese—aye, and a ham, cured in that very chamber in the chimbley, child. But, dear, to be sure, was you set against meeting Sir Jasper just for the seeing of him step into his curricle?"

"You didn't happen to note, mother, the gentleman who stepped in after him?"

Farmer Pounce and his wife exchanged a scared look, and then by common consent transferred it to their daughter. There was silence, broken only by the cheerful

song of the kettle on its chain over the embers, and the stertorous breathing of the infant farmer in the cot.

Then, with a catch in her breath:

"Well, child?" ventured Mother Pounce.

Once more Pamela tossed her head. She was seated at a corner of the kitchen table, needle, scissors, and workbox at her elbow, and she turned and twisted the lilac satin rosette in her hand.

"Well," she said at last, without looking up. "I don't happen to want to meet him, that's all."

"How, my dear?" Mrs. Pounce shot a frightened glance at her husband's grim face, and another at her daughter's bright, bent head.

"Ain't the young gentleman a friend of yours?" she asked faintly.

Pamela snapped her thread.

"You do want to know a lot, don't you, mother dear? But there! There's no reason why I shouldn't tell you. I've done nothing to be ashamed of. That young gentleman has the good taste to admire me a mortal lot, but he ain't got the good taste, in my opinion, to admire me the right way. He came after me to Canterbury, knowing I was due here for my Christmas holiday, and I sent him packing, and, thinks I, 'tis done now, once for all, and we'll be the best of friends at a distance. And you could have knocked me down with a feather when I see his black eye roaming round the church this morning. Encourage him by going with you to-night? That would never do, Pamela, my girl! says I to myself, and——"

"What dost mean by the right way, daughter?" interrupted the farmer, who had been ruminating her words, and not found them to his liking. The veins of his forehead were swelled; the hand that gripped the wooden arm of his chair shook.

"I mean the wrong way. Now, father, don't you be a-working yourself up. I can look after myself, and ain't that just what I'm doing? Mother, I vow your

cap will beat the one I made for the Duchess of Queensberry all to nothing. Now, won't the children be pleased when they find those cakes all piping hot, mother? They ought to be in soon now—back from Rector's. I'd like to try the little gown on my poppet ere you put her to rest to-night."

It was the first party Sir Jasper had invited to Standish Hall since the death of his wife, and lavish as was his hospitality, the loss of that incomparable woman had never been more painfully felt. A widower-forlornness was over everything. Dusty, flowerless, unkempt the parlours; discomfort, an open negligence of refined detail, the lack of the controlling hand, in fine, was sensible to all his guests.

The Christmas dinner was over, and the ladies had retired. If you had cared to have examined the bottles in rows on the floor, or the cut-glass decanters on the table, you would have found that the company had drawn considerably on Sir Jasper's generous cellar, and had not scrupled to mix very freely.

Sir Jasper and his youngest male guest, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, were at the height of an argument, egged on and applauded by good-natured Squire Upshott, and that saturnine rake, Sir James Devlin, while Lawyer Grinder, from Canterbury, leaned back, smiling grimly, his grey fingers round his glass, his grey eyes acute, his large ears pricked outside his scratch wig for any business advantage the holiday dissipation should lay open.

"Pshaw! My dear fellow, the girl's been three years in Paris, I tell you! You'll not have me believe she's better than her neighbours. Why, don't I know all about her? Isn't her father squatting on a bit of land that juts into my ring fence—'pon honour, like a fly in a man's honey—eh, Grinder? As handsome a slut as I ever laid eyes on, if that's the bouncer I saw at church this morning. If you're after her, lad, go in and win! If not, step aside, and make room for your elders!"

Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs took a draught from the beaker in front of him, then cast rather a wild glance at his host.

"You!" cried he. "You step in with Pamela Pounce! My dear Sir Jasper, I do not intend to be uncivil, but the idea is too droll!"

"How now? Is Miss so difficult? You know 'tis but a milliner?"

"Ay, I know more of her, I dare swear, than you do. Difficult? Well, Sir Jasper, you or anyone may try their chances so far as I am concerned—I would not give that for them"—snapping his fingers. "Pure waste! When I tell you that I have failed——"

The unconscious cockscombry was greeted with a shout of laughter.

"Hark to him!" cried old Upshott.

"Odds life!" jeered Sir Jasper. "You stimulate me! So fastidious?"

"Nay!" Young Bellairs flung a fine black eye about him. "So virtuous," said he, his voice sinking quite an octave deeper than its usual gay note.

There was another laugh; and then a silence; and then Sir Jasper repeated drawling:

"So virtuous? It all depends what the virtue is—eh, gentlemen? There's prudence, now—they tell me 'tis much practised of the French."

"What am I to take out of that, sir?"

"Why lad, you may take it that Miss knows her value. With all due deference to your good looks, you might fail where one like myself might succeed."

"Meaning, Sir Jasper——?"

"Meaning, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, that little milliners, especially if they've been in Paris, may have learnt to have an eye to the main chance."

There was again much and loud merriment The four other gentlemen looked at the one handsome youth of the party as if it were agreeable to see his comb cut.

"Gad, if there's any betting going on it, I'll back Jasper," said Sir James Devlin, with that cold smile of his which seemed to blight where it rested. "But the mischief's in it, who'd take up the wager at such odds? What? Sweet, penniless Romeo in the one scale, and rich Sir Paris in the other, and Juliet a French milliner, Pshaw!"

"Why then, Sir James," cried Mr. Bellairs. "Romeo is none so penniless but that he can back his own word. I'm ready to wager Sir Jasper this moment as much as he cares to risk that Miss Pamela Pounce—who is not French, sir, but good Kentish stock—will send him to the right-about, as she has sent—aye, though 'tis I say it—a better man! That all his money-bags will not weigh his nutshell"—he crushed one under his clenched hand on the mahogany as he spoke—"against her virtue."

Sir Jasper grew red in the face; his eyes protruded, his veins swelled.

"Why, done with you, you poor innocent——"

"Stay, stay," intervened Sir James. "If there's to be betting, let's do it proper, a' Heaven's name! *In primo*, what is the wager to be?"

Sir Jasper and Bellairs spoke together:

"That pretty Pounce will pounce fast enough if it is made worth her while," cried Sir Jasper, with a guffaw. And:

"That Sir Jasper has about as much chance of Miss Pamela Pounce's favour as of the Princess Royal's," asserted Bellairs.

"Now, tut, tut!" Sir James Devlin shook his hea and clacked his tongue. "If I'm to draw up your wager, gentlemen, you must, if you please, be a trifle less slipshod. You can't bet on a pun, Sir Jasper, nor you on a high-falutin' comparison to royal ladies, young man. You've got to bet on facts, my lads. Say, that a week from to-day we find the young person agreeably installed under the protection of our host here, in—better say London—

eh, Jasper? Might be a bit awkward, too close to Miss's family, what? Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs here to be given ocular proof that circumstances alter cases. Let your charmer ask him to tea in her new abode this day week."

"Carry her off, carry her off, good old style. Tally-ho!" cried the tipsy squire.

"Capital idea!" Mr. Grinder shook with amusement. "Run away with her! Carry her off, and keep her from the hats and feathers, Sir Jasper, and I'll see that you get Little Pitfold at long last. We'll foreclose for the rest of the mortgage. Zounds, we will! Drat that girl! She's been paying off at an uncommon quick rate. Took my breath away, she did. We had to give old Pounce a couple of years for the look of the thing, you remember—never dreaming—But there! Time will be up next Lady Day, and"—he broke into dry chuckling—"if you carry off the girl you'll win your wager, and get your land into the bargain. Kill two birds with one stone."

Jocelyn Bellairs lay back in his seat with arms folded, and a scornful smile on his countenance. He did not care what conditions were imposed, and the higher the stake the better for him. He was so sure of the result.

Sir James Devlin had drawn out his tablets.

"The wager's plain enough now," quoth he. "Sir Jasper Standish wagers Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs that the girl, Pamela Pounce, will give him a dish of tea this day week, at an address hereafter to be determined, the said Pamela Pounce being then established under the protection of the said Jasper Standish. What are the stakes?"

"Oh, make it worth while!" eagerly cried Bellairs.

Devlin gave him a keen side-glance.

"'Tis scarce usual to make the stakes higher than you can meet, Mr. Bellairs."

The young man flushed darkly. But before he could reply:

"Odds my life," exclaimed Sir Jasper. "Let's make it worth while! What say you to a thousand guineas?"

"Done!" cried Jocelyn eagerly. Then he added: "I'd like to make a stipulation. If Sir James loses, let him remit the rest of that mortgage first, whatever it is. I'll be content with the residue."

"'Pon my word, sir, that's a strange proposal," said Sir Jasper, staring with an air which gave him an odd resemblance to an incensed bull.

"You can cry off the whole bet, if you're afraid of it," taunted his guest.

"Foh!" said Mr. Grinder. "'Tis but a matter of a hundred and eighty-nine pounds, when all is said and done. Never niggle at that, Sir Jasper. Go in, and win! 'Pon me soul!" cried the old sinner, rubbing his hands, "I'd sleep better in my grave if I thought the Standish estate had got Pitfold at last."

"The stakes to be a thousand guineas," murmured Devlin as he wrote, "out of which Sir Jasper remits the rest of Farmer Pounce's mortgage, one hundred and eighty-nine pounds and hands the residue eight hundred and eleven, plus the shillings for the guineas, to Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs. Any backers? Fifty guineas on Jasper. Who'll take me?"

Squire Upshott was too far gone, and Lawyer Grinder shook his head, so Sir James had to content himself with jotting down: "No backers."

"Why, zounds!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, after he had ruminated a while. "It seems that more hangs on this betting to-night than the virtue of Miss, after all. What? The farm that we Standishes from grandfather down have vainly been trying to get hold of. That's a fine idea of yours, Grinder, odds my life, it is! A thousand guineas besides, and as fine an armful—hark ye, Devlin, did ye notice her this morning in church, as neat as a chestnut filly? Foh! There's blood in her, sir, there's blood in her, or I'm no judge——"

He broke off. 'Twas a dashed superior smile on young puppy's face. What made the fellow so cocksure, in the name of all that was sly? A sudden thought struck him.

"Look you here, Master Bellairs," cried he, with a muffled roar. "No collusion! No putting your head and Miss Pounce's together to do me out of a thousand guineas! Eh, Devlin? Eh, Grinder? No blanked tricks!"

Jocelyn's nostrils quivered scornfully.

"I give you my word of honour, Sir Jasper," said he, "to have no communication in private with the young lady till your week is out."

"Come, come!" said Sir James. "Split me, Jasper, we're all gentlemen here!"

The smile on the face of Mr. Bellairs became accentuated.

"I'm ready to give Sir Jasper any guarantee," said he.

"Deuce take him! He's like a fellow with a card up his sleeve!" thought Sir Jasper. "Word of honour, or no word of honour, I'll make Devlin keep watch for me."

When they went upstairs to the splendid, neglected drawing-room where Lady Barbara Flyte, her niece, Miss Lesbia Ogle, and Mrs. Colonel Dashwood were waiting to pour out tea for them, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs showed himself in high spirits.

"Ah, Pamela, my girl!" cried he to himself, "that was an angry look you cast at me across your prayer-book this morning, a monstrous, unpeaceful kind of look to a man of goodwill; but if this day's work has not wiped out old scores—A 'filly,' he called you. Aye, you'll come over the fence as clean as a bird. I've no fear of you, my splendid girl, and you'll be kinder to me, I dare swear, when next we meet; but that won't be this day week, at any lodging paid for by Sir Jasper."

* * * *

"Why, la, Sir Jasper, what a merry tune!" And "Oh, Sir Jasper, what a strange, pretty place!" And, "Why, Sir Jasper, 'tis the most Christmas sight I've ever beheld!" And, "Pray, pray, Sir Jasper, don't ask me to trip it with your country bumpkins, for I vow and protest I could never pick up those vulgar steps!" And, "Oh, Aunt Bab, do but look at the pink roses in Goody's cap!" And, "Oh, Miss Ogle, you're nowhere, I declare, beside Miss in feathers yonder, plucked from the old turkey before mother put it in the pot." "You're too droll, Mrs. Dashwood!" "Do you think, Sir Jasper, the buck in the top-boots would have me for his partner if I simpered ever so sweet upon him?"

Sir Jasper, moving in this fire of chatter, a lady on each arm and Miss Lesbia Ogle hanging on his coat-tails, appeared at the barn-door when he believed his guests to be assembled. The merry tune to which Lady Bab had alluded fell silent at his approach; there were curtseys and dips and bows on every side, while the three fiddlers mopped their streaming faces and, rising as one man from the wooden bench on which they had been seated in a row, duly ducked their shock heads to their patron.

Sir Jasper gave condescending smiles and short, indifferent nods right and left, the while his eyes roamed, seeking, this way and that. Here was old Mother Pounce, right enough, as large as one of her own feather beds, in a lace cap, if you please, mighty genteel, with lavender knots. And Farmer Pounce in his red waistcoat; confound the fellow, with his air of independence! Aye, was there not a sort of triumph about him? Don't cry till you're out of the wood, Mr. Yeoman! And split him, what a row of young Pounces—a fine healthy litter! And, 'pon honour, a monstrous pretty little chit in white muslin with a straw hat! Pshaw! He had no time to waste on silly seventeen. Where was their agreeable bone of contention; where was the handsome Pamela?

"How, now, yeoman, where is your elder daughter?"

"At home, Sir Jasper," answered the father, with the brevity that declines discussion.

"Sure, Sir Jasper," put in Mrs. Pounce, conciliatingly. "My daughter was vastly obleeged, but she was a trifle fatigued this evening."

"She would stay and look after our Tom," piped Susie.

"She preferred not to come, sir," said Yeoman Pounce, frowning.

Sir Jasper's brow had likewise gathered thunder-clouds. His eyes rolled inward. One excuse contradicted another; the farmer's insolence voiced the truth. And Master Jocelyn Bellairs, who had not accompanied his host to the dance, because forsooth, it might be difficult for him to keep his honourable pledge—Master Jocelyn Bellairs, who had announced his intention of taking a pleasure stroll this freezing Christmas night—Master Jocelyn Bellairs, whose very presence at Standish Hall demanded explanation; who was practically a self-invited visitor, where was he? Pshaw, did they take him for a fool? Was he to be mocked in his own house and jockeyed by his own guest? Zounds! The whole plot was clear in a minute. A plot it was; no wonder Mr. Bellairs had that insufferable air of certainty. He and his lady-love would soon be laughing over the thought of how they had swindled him of a thousand guineas. And what a spending time they would have together!

If the revelation came swift as lightning to Sir Jasper, no less swiftly did he make up his mind for action.

It was a three-mile walk to Pitfold Farm. He would have out his curricle, and his bloods, and be beforehand with Bellairs.

Some ten minutes later he was bowling along the frozen road at the highest speed of his roughed horses, an astounded groom beside him. Purpose was setting in his mind as hard as the ice in the ditches. There was no time like the present. He had a slippery pair of young

rascals to deal with. If he was to win his wager he must carry off the girl this very night.

He laid his plans with a wiliness which is not infrequently a characteristic of gross natures. Conscious in himself of a fine capacity for evil, such as he will be suspicious of every one and everything; look for treachery from his most trusted friend, and infidelity in the wife of his bosom.

He dismounted at the farmyard gate, and bade Job Stallion, the groom, drive in alone and announce that Sir Jasper Standish had sent the curricle for Miss Pounce, as it was her father and mother's pleasure she should come to the dance.

The ruse succeeded with a facility beyond his expectations. Pamela had been finding the lonely evening disconsolate enough. Baby Tom slept, while old Nance displayed uncommon wakefulness. The time was heavy on Pamela's hands, and to while it away she had had the happy thought of trying on the pretty garments which she had prepared before Mr. Bellairs' appearance in church had made a call upon her prudence.

Now the reaction which so often follows self-sacrifice had set in. She was beginning to call herself a fool, and to regret her excessive discretion. Thus when old Nance laboured, panting, to the attic chamber, and supplemented Job's message with: "You'd never think of saying nay now, Pam, my dear. Ain't it Providence you should just have been fitting on? And, oh, to be sure, was there ever so pure lovely a gown? You'll be the belle o' the ball, my dearie, that you will, and easy!"

Pamela never hesitated at all. She caught her travelling-cloak off the peg, and lifted her best feathered hat from its band-box—how could a milliner resist such an opportunity?—pinned it on her auburn curls, cast herself headlong down the stairs, out through the farm kitchen like a whirlwind, and laughing, swung herself up on the curricle beside the grinning Joe.

She was rather taken aback when this latter halted outside the farmyard gate, and a portly figure appeared from the shadow of the oak tree. Hat in hand, Sir Jasper pleasantly saluted her.

"Why, Miss Pounce, this is capital. Your father and mother vowed you'd never come, but I said I was sure so good a daughter would be obedient to her parents. Nevertheless"—he was climbing up beside her in the high seat, while Job shut the gates behind them—"I was ready, you see, to exercise a neighbour's persuasion, should you persist in your cruel resolve. The ball would be nothing without you, 'pon honour. There are half a dozen fine young bucks with faces as long as my whip-handle already."

By this time Job was up on the back seat, and his master started the chestnuts at a pace that only his own pride and temper would have urged upon them.

"Oh, la!" cried Miss Pounce, and made a clutch for her hat. She drew the pure keen air into her lungs, felt the wind of their passage blow with the most delicious invigoration against her face. "Oh, la! Was there ever anything so beautiful? 'Tis the first time I have driven by moonlight. 'Tis the first time I have ever driven in a curricle! Oh, 'tis like flying, Sir Jasper! Oh, what a night! I vow I feel like a bird!"

The moonlight flooded the road, hedges and trees sparkled and shimmered white as diamonds. The sky was one mighty sapphire, darkly, wonderfully blue. The stars, fainting in the moonlight, looked like the thousand facets of a jewel.

"Oh," cried Pamela again, "I'll make a head out of it for the opera, I will indeed! Sapphire blue ribbands and frosted silver feathers. 'Tis an inspiration.'

This gave Sir Jasper his opening.

"Why," said he, "'tis a monstrous pity such a monstrous fine girl as you should have to work for her living. The moment I set eyes on you this morning, said I to myself——"

Pamela interrupted:

"Keep your pity and your compliments, sir. They're wasted on me."

"Why, how now, I like your spirit. I vow, my dear, 'tis you are wasted on such a life."

"What if I like my work, sir?"

"You were born to wear 'em—the fine hats—not to make 'em. You were born to be a lady, that's what I said to myself the moment I clapped eyes on you this morning."

"Foh! I know 'tis gentlemen's way to start this kind of silly talk whenever they get with a poor girl, but I assure you, sir, I've no relish for it. And as for my being a lady, I've seen too much of gentlefolk. I wouldn't thank the Lord to ha' made me one."

She spoke with her head up and a straight back.

"'Tis but gentlemen's way," she repeated to herself; "but I'll let him see he'll have to respect me, lady or no lady."

She gripped the rail of the curricle, not to give herself courage—for she had no thought there was anything to fear—but to brace herself the better against any further presumption. She was quite unprepared, therefore, when he turned his bloods away from the road leading to Standish Hall, and, with a flourish of the whip, sent them helter-skelter up the hill on the London causeway.

The cry she gave was one more of anger than of fear. A solitary pedestrian, coming at a swinging pace along the road which led from Sir Jasper's residence, heard it, and beheld the curricle as it topped the hill, fantastically silhouetted in black against the moonlit sky. He gave an answering shout, and started running. But he had as much chance of overtaking the gig as if it had been a bird on the flight. He gave up, panting, after a yard or two, stamped his foot, shook his fist at the radiant sky, and started running again in the opposite direction.

" Where are you taking me to ? "

Sir Jasper's teeth and his eyeballs flashed horribly in the silver light as he smiled upon Pamela.

" You'll be uncommon grateful to me one day, my pretty little milliner."

" Good Heaven, what do you mean, sir ? "

" I dare swear you ain't so far from being grateful now. Oh, aye ! 'Tis the regular thing to set up a hullaballoo, but I'm not to be taken in by any tushery, and so I tell you ! You may scream till you're blue, there ain't a soul on the roads to hear you, and as for kicking, 'tain't easy on a curricle, so, like a girl of sense let's pretend you've had your vapours, and you and I will have a glorious time together. Why, who was talking of silver feathers ? 'Tis golden chains I'll give you, my splendid child ; aye, and a pearl each for your pretty ears—I can't see 'em under your hat, but I dare swear they're pretty like the rest—and maybe a diamond brooch for your kerchief. And you shall have a house of your own and a pair of fine London maids to wait on you, and I'll take you about, my dear, and you will have naught to do in the world but enjoy yourself."

She listened in dead silence till he had finished, and then without condescending to reply to him, turned her head over her shoulder, and hailed the groom.

" Job Stallion, Job Stallion," she said, " your father was reared on my father's land. Will you see a Kentish girl carried away to perdition against her will, and not lift a finger to save her ? "

" Job Stallion," said Sir Jasper, snatching a pistol from the seat beside him, " if you unfold your arms you're a dead man."

Then Sir Jasper and the yeoman's daughter stared into each other's eyes, each drawing long, fierce breaths through dilated nostrils. Suddenly he laughed and dropped the pistol back into its holster. Again he sent his whip circling. The horses broke into a canter on the downward slope, the light-hung vehicle swaying and

leaping behind them. The very intensity of their speed saved them from stumbling.

At length Pamela said in a low voice :

" At least I have a right to know where you are taking me."

" Did I not tell you ? To London."

" You do not think I am so simple as to believe you can drive to London with these horses to-night ?!"

" Why, of course not. We'll stop at Ashford, and get a chaise and four of the best posters money can hire. We'll be in London to-night, never fear. Hark, there's nine of the clock striking from Catterford Hill."

He pointed with his whip. Pamela saw the square tower of the little church silver and black against the sky A lump rose in her throat. For the first and only time that night a burst of hysterical weeping threatened to overwhelm her.

" I'm lost," she said to herself, " if I don't keep brave. If I don't keep my head, I'm lost."

No strong soul ever cries vainly on courage. The anguish passed, her spirit rose.

" Sir Jasper Standish," said she, " why are you running away with me ? Tell me that."

" Won't you believe I want to make a lady of you ? "

" No."

" Well, then, the mere sight of that handsome face of yours this morning has made me mad in love with you. Will you believe that ? "

" Neither the one nor the other, sir. You see," she went on, " I am not kicking nor screaming, I am in your power, and I can't help myself. I think you'd find it better for yourself, sir, and better for me, if you'd tell me the truth."

Her quiet tone, the perfect composure of her face, very pale and lovely in the moonlight as she turned it upon him, struck some faint spark of generosity.

" By Heaven ! " said he admiringly. " You're a well

plucked one. The truth you want. Split me, 'tis all true! But you're right, there's yet another reason. I want to win a wager, my little darling!"

"What wager, sir?"

"You." He grinned at her. "That spark of yours—he is a spark of yours; ain't he?—that fine young fellow, Jocelyn Bellairs, he wagered you were too virtuous for a man to have a chance with. But I wagered him you wasn't. Come now, you're a good-hearted piece. Help me to win my wager, and I'll make it worth your while."

Pamela reflected profoundly. Then she gave a little laugh.

"Why, Sir Jasper!" she exclaimed. "What sad, wild creatures you gentlemen are! It comes to this, then. I've got to make the best of a bad job." Then she swallowed hard, and said, with a still more sprightly air, "You'll give me a bit of supper at Ashford, I suppose, for I'm mortal hungry."

He broke into hoarse laughter, and cried again that, by Heaven, she was a well-plucked one, and they'd get on first class; that she should have the finest supper the Bear Inn could afford. If she'd stand by him, by Jingo, he'd stand by her. There wasn't a gentleman in England who'd be such a friend to the woman who trusted him as he would be to her.

When they arrived at Ashford, she demanded, with a sudden air of command, which became her, he thought, mightily, and tickled his already high good humour to positive hilarity, that she should be brought to a sitting-room and partake of the meal in privacy while the post-chaise was being got ready.

"And," quoth she, "let it be champagne, Sir Jasper, since"—she gave him a wide, taunting smile—"'tis to be made worth my while."

He flung an arm about her the moment the waiter had withdrawn; she freed herself with a vigorous thrust, but as she did so, she laughed.

" Nay, drink your sillery, sir. Aye, pour me a glass. Oh, aye, I'll drink any toast you like. Have you not said it yourself ? I'm the best-natured girl in the world—so long as you keep your place, sir. Why, 'tis the finest pigeon-pie I've tasted since Paris. You know I was in Paris, Sir Jasper ? "

Sir Jasper chuckled, winking at her.

Her fingers clenched round her knife, the while her smile would not have misbefitted the lips of a Bacchante.

" And will you bring me to the opera, Sir Jasper ? Oh, and to Ranelagh ? Oh, to think of me going to Ranelagh on a gentleman's arm, like a lady ! "

He was enraptured. He tossed the remainder of his tumbler down, and filled himself a third, emptying the bottle. He had almost forgotten the wager in the intoxication of his personal triumph. Dash it ! It had not taken him long to cut out young Bellairs. What a demnition handsome piece she was. There wasn't one of those raffish ladies he had left behind him at Standish Hall could hold a candle to her. And odds his life ! What a pair of eyes she had, and what teeth, and what a skin !

Suddenly she dropped her knife and fork.

" Sir Jasper," said she, with an air of great gravity, " I'll not go a step farther with you unless you do something for me."

" Name it, my dear."

" Why, sir, send Job back with a letter to my parents. And 'twill be the best for yourself, I can tell you, as matters stand. My father wouldn't let the king rob him of his daughter without a fight."

He stood staring at her doubtfully, his wide nostrils scenting mischief like an irritated bull ; she went on very quickly, " I'll not go a step farther with you unless you do. Give me your tablets—gentlemen always carry them, I know. You shall see for yourself what I write.

" Dear Father—don't be alarmed, I'm going with Sir Jasper for a wager. 'Tis a mere joke. He's too grand a gentleman to let harm come to me out of it.—Your loving daughter, Pam."

She read it to him. He went over it himself, then once more tried to catch her to him, vowing she was as clever as she was handsome.

" Nay, nay, nay ! " She was the most imperative, tantalising creature possible to imagine. " Now, Sir Jasper, run and give this to Job yourself. Stay, put a guinea with it, to make the lad eager. Tell him to ride, ride, ride, hell for leather ! Isn't that what you gentlemen say ? Hell for leather," she repeated, laughing, as she hustled him from the room. " Don't come back to me till you've seen him start."

He went. That third bumper of champagne on the head of so many potations earlier in the day, after the long, cold drive, had fairly stupefied him. He went, because her strong will drove him, without attempting to analyse her motive. For the moment his suspicious brain was lulled to a kind of imbecile complacence. He went pounding forth. As soon as the sound of his heavy steps died away on the wooden boards, Pamela was out of the room like a dart.

She had seen the dark pit of the back stairs gape on the passage as they had passed along to the sitting-room. She was down it now, as sure-footed as if it had been lit up. In another moment, past a pair of staring kitchen sluts and a tapman, she was out in the back yard and running along the village street.

She always declared afterwards that she had been as one guided. She did not pause to reconnoitre or hesitate at a turning. Fleet and light as a shadow, she raced through the alleys of the little town, deserted this Christmas night, till she came to a point on the main road which she knew Job Stallion must pass on his homeward way, and then she hid herself.

She had not very long to wait before the beat of horses' hoofs resounded on the frozen ground. Hell for leather, indeed! 'Twas the most egregious jog-trot that ever took lazy groom and unwilling horse from warm quarters on a Christmas night!

Job Stallion let fly a terrified oath as Pamela rose out of the ditch and laid a hand upon his bridle. He was scarcely less alarmed when he discovered that he had to do with neither wraith nor highwaywoman, but with his master's prize. She cut short his "darsents" and his whimpering expostulations very sternly.

"I am going to ride pillion behind you, Job Stallion, and you must whip up that fat brute of a post-horse to something of a canter, for you've got to carry me back home before Sir Jasper can overtake us. Thank your stars, my lad," she went on, "that the Lord has given you a chance of redeeming the night's work, for I tell you it would have gone hard with any who had a hand in it. Men have been hanged for less!"

She kept him busy with whip and spur till the old grey mare wheezed and bucketed along the road at a pace astonishing for her years and size.

It was somewhere midway between Ashford and Pitfold that they crossed Mr. Bellairs riding towards them on his own rakish chestnut as if for a race. If Pamela's heart beat high at sight of him she did not avow her pride and pleasure even to herself; if her bright, clear heat of anger and triumphant determination gave place to tender, womanly emotions, she betrayed no sign of them. She postponed explanations, and issued instructions to Mr. Bellairs as to Job Stallion in the accents of one who means they shall be carried out.

"You will kindly ride a hundred paces behind me, Mr. Bellairs. I have no notion of having my name mixed up with yours or Sir Jasper's this night. As for you, Job, hand me over that tablet. You can keep the guinea for yourself. And you will drop me, if you please, in the courtyard at Standish Hall, for 'tis not too late to

join the dancers in the barn. And I mean there shall be no talk on this night's work, if I can help it.

"If you breathe a word, Job Stallion, you'll wish you never were born, or my father's name not Jeremy Pounce! And as for you, Mr. Bellairs, sir, you've won your wager—yes, I know all about it—so you owe me a good turn, I think, and all I ask for is silence, silence! My father's a violent man, and it does no woman's name any good—no, not even a poor milliner's—to be made such sport of as mine betwixt you two gentlemen to-night. As for Sir Jasper, I warrant he'll hold his tongue. He don't cut so fine a figure!"

And so it ended. Pamela went to the barn dance, after all, and danced in vast condescension with several agreeable young farmers. Jocelyn Bellairs got the rector to introduce him to Mrs. Pounce, and sitting beside that lady, made himself so agreeable that she was, as she expressed it, quite in a twitter. Mindful of his word passed to Sir Jasper, he did not again approach Pamela, but the gaze with which he followed her about the long room was eloquent enough.

When the little Pounces had nearly yawned themselves off the benches, and Pamela's poppet, Peg, had gone to sleep outright, her curly head on her mother's ample lap, it was the elegant young gentleman who conducted Mrs. Pounce to the waiting farm cart, with as much courtesy as if he were leading a duchess to her barouche. The moon was set. The courtyard was fitfully illumined by torches thrust into clamps in the wall, and by the shifting rays of the lanterns carried by the revellers.

As Pamela, standing by the cart, lifted Peg up to her mother's extended arms, while Mr. Bellairs obligingly held the lantern, Sir Jasper's curricle wheeled slowly into the yard drawn by a pair of fairly exhausted thoroughbreds. Without stirring from his high seat, the reins slipping from his hands, Sir Jasper stared at the picture painted on the night as at some spectral vision.

"Why, here's Sir Jasper!" cried an obsequious voice. "Three cheers for Sir Jasper, lads!"

Perhaps because his appearance had been as unexpected as his disappearance, perhaps because the sight of his dreadful face of wrath, flamingly illumined by the red glare of a torch was enough to choke off any demonstration, perhaps because he was too unpopular a landlord even for so many glasses of negus and so many mince-pies to counterbalance—however it may have been, there was but a poor response; a faint cry, that rose and quavered away. It was almost more deadly in its effect than an execration. Sir Jasper rolled a bloodshot eye upon his tenants and neighbours.

"Blast you all!" he cried huskily, let himself drop from his seat, and reeled towards the house.

* * * * *

On New Year's day Pamela returned to London, and, on the day after, a summons to Yeoman Pounce to attend at Mr. Grinder's office in Canterbury caused some perturbation to the inmates of Little Pitfold. But when he returned he brought astounding intelligence.

"You'll never believe it, wife!" he cried from the threshold, "but the mortgage is paid off! Buss me, mother, we're free of our own again!"

"Oh, 'tis our Pam! 'Tis that best of children! Oh, the surprise, father! Oh, the slyness of it, never telling us a word! Oh, was there ever so good a girl?"

"Lawyer Grinder," said the farmer, letting himself drop heavily in a chair, "kept a close mouth. He wasn't at liberty, those were his words, to say who it was as had paid it off. 'But paid off it is, and that's enough for you, farmer,' says he. 'I reckon I know whom I'm beholden to,' I says, 'and I'll tell you plain, lawyer, says I, 'I'm not a man as 'ud be beholden without it was to one who, so to speak, be but paying back what's due to a parent.' At that he smiles on the wrong side of his

mouth, after his fashion, wife, none best pleased, I can tell you. As for Sir Jasper—well, he won't get hold o' Little Pitfold nohow now ! "

When Mrs. Pounce wrote to Pamela in London the letter was very full of blessings on a good daughter.

" And your father is so out of himself with joy, my dear, 'tis a new lease of life."

And Pamela smiled as she read. Her lover, now very respectful, though by no means less ardent, had told her the story of the wager. Who was to say, after all, that she had not paid off the mortgage ? As for the rest, she knew when to speak and when to be silent.

CHAPTER VI

In which my Lady Kilcroney Strikes a Match and Miss Pounce Throws Cold Water on it

The late Lady Standish was one of my Lady Kilcroney's earliest friends.

When Kitty first burst upon society in the select precincts of Bath—then the fabulously rich, unpardonably pretty, delightful, audacious, amazing little Widow Bellairs—Julia Standish was scarce a three weeks' bride.

From the very beginning Kitty's endeavour had been to insert some backbone into the lovely but invertebrate Julia, and once, in despair, she had summed up the situation by exclaiming: "That 'twas like trying to mould too soft a jelly: the moment you thought you had her into shape, she was deliquescent again."

Therefore, though the connection was long and close; though Kitty, whether as Mistress Bellairs or my Lady Kilcroney, counted no party complete without her Julia; though, when in town together, scarce a day could pass upon which Julia, driven by the stress of some overwhelming emotional crisis, did not fling herself, weeping, upon Kitty's breast, it could not be said that my Lady Kilcroney was very ardently attached to Lady Standish, or that her death, sad and premature as it was, plunged her in any depth of sorrow.

The truth was that Julia Standish, elegant and virtuous, fair to look on and fond of feeling, belonged to the class that wear out the affections by over-usage. The stuff of Kitty's sturdy good comradeship had been worn so uncommonly thin, that at the time of Julia's lamented

death scarcely enough had been left between them to make a darn worth while.

Kitty liked life in a strong brew, and Lady Standish wept into her cup so persistently that there was nothing left but salt water.

Nevertheless, when the news of the irreparable event reached her, my Lady, being the best-hearted little woman in the world, wept herself for quite three minutes, and then, dispatching her Lord to see what service he could be to poor Sir Jasper, ordered her sedan and had herself deposited at Madame Mirabel's in Bond Street, to order a black bonnet and mourning mantle for the funeral.

My Lord had set out on his melancholy errand with a dutiful concealment of its intense distastefulness.

He thought Jasper's case the most confounded dreadful a man could be placed in, and shrank, with all his Irish softness, from the spectacle of a woe beyond his consolation.

He found matters even more tragic than he anticipated. The last word Sir Jasper's incomparable Julia murmured to him, as, her hand in his, she left him for a better world, was to remind him of his promise never to replace her. This pledge had been exacted many times during the seven years of their existence together, but never more solemnly than in the hours that had preceded her demise.

From the moment of her seizure—spasms on the lungs—to that last breath, Sir Jasper had been in unremitting attendance. Every physician of note had been summoned to her bedside; but, in spite of all the resources of science, bloodings, blisters and cuppings, pills and potions, poor Julia Standish persisted in succumbing. He was the most afflicted of widowers! She had been the pearl of wives. No woman could ever compare with her in the whole world again. He was a blasted man. Console himself! he roared. That angel, that departed saint need have put him to no promise. She might sleep in peace; her Jasper was henceforth naught but a solitary mourner. What was left him, indeed, but to live for

his little ones, those five pledges of their mutual affection; to rear them worthy of such a mother, and, his task accomplished, take his broken heart to lie beside her in the grave? "For I will be buried with my Julia," he cried upon each fresh gush of tears.

"Faith," said Lord Kilcroney to his Kitty, describing the scene to her when they met again, "she's dropt her mantle upon him with a vengeance. Wasn't it the watering-pot you used to call her, me darling? The poor lady. He caught me by the neck a while ago, and troth he soaked me to the skin. 'She was the most elegant woman!' cries he. 'She was that, me lad,' says I. 'And the most virtuous!' cries he, with another gulp. 'Aye, that she was,' cries I. And sure, Kitty, if ever a poor soul made virtue tedious and dismal——"

"Hush, hush!" my Lady Kilcroney interrupted. "Speak no ill of the dead, sir. Poor Julia, she was a fond, foolish creature, but she was an old friend, and, 'pon honour. Denis, I'm crying for her myself. 'Tis but fitting indeed, that Sir Jasper, who was a sad, bad husband, my love, and would have given any woman red eyes, should mourn her now."

"'Tis the frantickest widower I ever met. Mourn, quotha! 'How shall I survive?' is all his cry, and to see him going on that way, you'd scarce give him a sennight."

"Psha!" said Kitty. "Such frantick fits never last. I give him a sennight, my Lord, to—to dry his eyes and look about for number two."

"'Pon me honour, Kitty, you're out of it! Didn't she extract a promise from him, the dying angel, that he'd never look at woman again, and as for marriage——"

"And if that isn't Julia all over!" cried Kitty indignantly. "And he with five children! A man of Sir Jasper's temperament! Tush! Pooh! And were I on my death bed, Denis, 'twould be the last of my wishes to lay such a monstrous bit of nonsense on your spirits. Why, 'twould be but tempting you to perjury. Yes,

you—or any other man. 'Look out for a well-bred creature, pray,' I would say, 'and a healthy, that she be kind to our little Denis, and pick her sensible, for the Lord's sake.' Now, Sir Jasper, mark my words . . . I give him a week to bellow, and, after that—observe me—he will be found at such common, low places as a cock-fight, or a bruising match, with a kerchief high about his neck, and a hat down on his eyes. And he will, like as not, make expeditions to Bristol and Plymouth, where he is less known, and where a man may attend a bit of sport without his friends' eyes upon him. Do I not know your masculine ways, my Lord? And by and by he will be found at the clubs, at the cards, and the betting; and however lugubrious he may show his countenance, and however sadly he may heave his sigh when he first appears, 'twill wear off marvellous! And oh, and oh," cried Kitty, breaking into wrathful laughter, "then there will be never such a buck on the town, nor one with such an eye for petticoats, as your disconsolate widower!"

"'Tis a biting tongue ye have in your head, me darling," said Kilcroney, half admiring, half displeased.

"Before the year is out," concluded my Lady triumphantly, "'twill be the duty of all his friends, aye, and of poor dear Julia's, who care for the welfare of her children, to see that he is safe wed. I shall look to it myself, I owe it to the memory of poor dear Julia!"

Kitty broke off. Her glance roamed. A frown corrugated her white forehead. Kilcroney saw that she was mentally seeking, among all her acquaintance, for a substitute with the desired qualifications.

About the time of Sir Jasper's bereavement, that distinguished peer, my Lord Ongar, put off this mortal coil. The title and fortune passed to a nephew, and it was found that his widow, and the daughter who was yet too young to have left the parent nest, were singularly ill provided for. My Lady Ongar, who was a French-woman, was in poor health; and much sympathy was

felt for her situation, as well as for that of the little Lady Selina, who, on the threshold of presentation to the world, found herself suddenly at so great a disadvantage. It was true that both her sisters had made good marriages; one to Lord Verney, who had a house in town as well as country property; the other to Squire Day, of Queen's Compton. But then, as Kitty Kilcroney said, who, that had a heart in her breast, could suggest placing a high-spirited girl under the charge of Susan Verney? "For sure, my dear, somewhere back there must have been a slave-driver among her ancestors. And as for Nan Day, was she not lost in domestic bliss? and no one ought to expect pretty Selina to bury herself in haycocks and babies—other people's babies!"

It was owing to the Viscountess Kilcroney's influence that the young lady was offered a post about the Princess Augusta, the second of the bevy of beautiful Royal Princesses; for, since assuming her duties as Lady-in-Waiting to Queen Charlotte, Kitty had vastly pleased Her Majesty in that capacity.

Not indeed that my Lady Kilcroney, who now had her own personal experience to go by, approved of Court life as a career for any young unmarried female. 'Twas monstrous cramping, she declared to those who had her complete confidence; and the Royals, perfect beings as they were, and gratifying as it was to be chosen to serve them, had a fashion of very naturally considering themselves paramount, and their favour the chief benefit of existence.

"I'll not have the child's youth sucked out of her," quoth my Lady, in the strict privacy of her chamber, to the grunting Denis, who himself disliked the Court and all its ways with a large intolerance, born of its demands on his Kitty. "But a year, my love, 'twill give her a certain stamp of elegance. We can scarce look for a very great marriage for our Selina, with never two farthings in her pocket, but there are a vast of pleasant gentlemen of the second rank who water at the

mouth at the thought of anything favoured by Royalty."

It was not till Lady Selina had been some nine months in her new post, and Sir Jasper Standish well nigh a year a widower, that the great idea flashed into Kitty's mind.

Sir Jasper was a personable man, and had not yet topped thirty-five; a very prime age for a bridegroom with the greenness of youth cast off, the tedium of maturity not yet as much as dawned. With your man of thirty-five it is a point of honour to be as ready with the generosity of youth as the lad of twenty, especially should his fancy turn to sweet seventeen. He will have gained, however, a vast experience, and, unless he be a fool, a seasoned judgment. Sir Jasper was no fool; and though he had so far justified my Lady Kilcroney's prognostications as to be more conspicuous at any dashing sport-meeting than ever before, he kept chiefly in the company of his own sex, and never so much as noticed the passage of the most flouncing petticoat; and who was more likely to know than Kitty, since she was the only lady in the world whose society the widower now frequented?

At first the talk would be all of his Julia; but in a little while lamentations gave way to more cheerful discourse anent the young family.

It was in her capacity of godmother to little Kate Standish that, a due interval having elapsed since the loss of their ever-to-be-regretted Julia, Kitty Kilcroney first addressed Sir Jasper on the subject of a second marriage. She was, of course, quite prepared for the shocked refusal which met her.

Was it possible my Lady Kilcroney should not be aware of the solemn vow, by which he had pledged himself to his Dying Treasure, to remain ever faithful to her memory?

My Lady Kilcroney was very well aware of it. Heaven knew, she exclaimed, rolling her pansy eyes towards the ceiling of her drawing-room—she was for the while free of her Court duties, and was established in the Hertford

Street mansion—Heaven knew, if ever there was anyone in the world who could appreciate what a second marriage meant to a true mourner it was she! When Bellairs went—" Ah, you never knew my first, Sir Jasper! The most excellent, the most estimable, the most generous and noble-minded of men. There was not a condition in his will, I do assure you! Everything, everything left to me! '*My dearest wife, Kitty, in token of the perfect happiness she gave me.*' Those were his words, Sir Jasper. But a year's happiness, alas! and he, poor seraph, scarce able to endure anyone in the room with him with the gout so cruel settled in his joints that, if you'll believe me, his feet were like nothing so much as warming-pans, and his hands—my poor Bellairs' hands, why, there were days when he could not have borne that a butterfly should settle on them! When my cherished martyr was released from his sufferings, did I not, like you, vow in my heart that I never, never would replace him?"

Here Kitty fixed her eyes upon Sir Jasper's lugubrious countenance, and, positively, though her tone was filled with such pious melancholy, they twinkled.

"I fail to see the analogy, my Lady Kilcroney," said he huffily. "My Julia was as young as she was fair, as elegant in form as she was virtuous in character."

"True, true, Sir Jasper! Bellairs became, very shortly after our espousals, a wreck, an absolute wreck. But he retained the most admirable amiability of temper. 'Twas indeed that which first drew my heart to him. 'My dear,' he said to me, 'when I heard that my poor old friend Ned had gone smash, and shot himself, and left a little daughter without a farthing to buy a ribbon with, I cast about in my mind what I should do to help her. And, faith, I can think of no better way, my dear, than to make a rich widow of you.' And then he set to laughing in his droll, wheezing way. 'I'm game for a year,' says he, 'if you can stand the old man for a year,' says he. 'I'll put you in the way of getting the best the world

can give you ; honour and good repute, and wealth and a young husband in due time—better than if your poor father had kept out of indigo. If you'll trust me, I'll trust you,' says he. And my dear Bellairs kept his word royally. He'd never so much as a suspicion of me ; or aught but a smile for my pleasures." Here a tear suddenly flashed. " I'm proud to say," cried Kitty. " I deserved his confidence. Is there ever anything so beautiful in life as wedded trust ? "

Sir Jasper went home thoughtful. His Julia had had every merit, but if she had had also just the tiniest part of Bellairs' the Nabob's generosity of mind, would he, could he have so often—as alas ! he had ! But there were times when he had been goaded, indubitably driven, to seek distraction. Angel as she had been, to what screaming vapours, what swoons had she not treated him ? How often also—here he held his head higher, and made a knowing thrust at a door post with his gold-headed walking-stick as he went by—had she not suspected the vilest deeds when he had been as innocent as the lambs in the field ?

" You cannot," said Sir Jasper, sapiently to himself, as his marital crimes appeared before him suddenly transmogrified into peccadilloes. " You cannot be said to betray a trust that has never been reposed in you."

Next time my Lady spoke of matrimony to the bereaved, it was in the tone of one who regrets a rash determination, but recognises its binding quality.

" What a pity, Sir Jasper, you should have been led into such fond folly ! To take such a vow ! Irrevocable of course. Who would have the dreadful courage to suggest the breaking of a pledge to one who is now among the saints. What if a father's duty points one way ? that death-bed obligation sternly points the other."

She pitied Sir Jasper—she did indeed. How was a man, and he so young, to deal with five children, and they with all the difficulties of life before them ; character, education and—heavens !—illnesses ? Measles and

mumps, hectics and whooping coughs, and all the rest of it! "Poor Julia, could she but see now to what her intemperate passion for you has led! If our Julia had a fault—dare I say it, Sir Jasper?—she was a little, leetle inclined to jealousy."

When Kitty returned to Queen's Lodge, to take up service with Her Majesty, Sir Jasper and she had come to discussing very freely the kind of person who might be regarded as worthy to fill their dearest Julia's shoes.

Kitty was full of suggestions, but, one way or another, the paragons enumerated by the lady were never to the gentleman's taste.

When Lady Selina joined the Court circle, she was, if truth be told, the very last young female whom Kitty could in conscience have selected as a fitting companion for a widower of Sir Jasper's kidney, or the proper kind of stepmother to his peevish brats. Nevertheless when the idea came, it was with the brilliant conviction of a flash of lightning.

Selina Vereker was not dark and masterful like Susan Verney, nor was she soft and warm-hearted, all feminine impulse and charm, like Nan Day. She was a bold piece, Kitty had decided from the first, with a short nose and a short temper, and hair under her powder as blazing as Sir Jasper's own, and a grey eye that possessed a certain cold, reflective audacity which made Kitty thoughtful. She was a judge of minxes. Withal the creature if not pretty, was mighty attractive; with a little head on a white throat, and a way of tossing it; slim, long limbs like a boy, and a freedom of movement inside her voluminous skirts that was almost unbecoming to her sex. And the tiresome child was in a hundred scrapes, and in Royalty's black books before she had been a fortnight at her duties. This was unpleasant for Kitty, who had recommended her. And, as she had a kind heart, it filled her with apprehension for the future. For if anything so awful were to happen as that Selina should fall into serious disgrace and be dismissed from Court, what

in the world would become of her? So poor, so naughty, and so innocent; with a pair of selfish sisters, and her mother retired to a convent! Why, with Royal displeasure upon her, never could she hope to ally herself to a genteel family!

Sir Jasper! Was not the man to her hand? He deserved a wife with some fire in her, after having so long endured the deliquescent Julia, and he deserved too, sad rake that he was, something with a temper of her own to keep him to attention and in his place.

"To heel, sir, or beware, there are other fine fellows in the world who are ready to appreciate what you have the bad taste to neglect."

Her mind made up, Kitty set to work with a transparent artifice, to which only the blundering male would fall a prey.

"Pray come to tea, to-morrow, sir—or stay, perhaps better not, for I have Princess Augusta's Maid-of-Honour, the little Selina Vereker, and, oh no, I would not for the world that you should meet!"

"And why, pray?"

"La, Sir Jasper, and you on the look-out for a new Lady Standish! You might fall in love with her, to be sure."

"And what then, my Lady Kilcroney?"

"Oh, Sir Jasper, Sir Jasper, that would never do!"

"And why not, ma'am?"

"But eighteen, sir."

"I see no objection there."

"Fie, Sir Jasper, and you turned thirty-six!"

"But thirty-five my last birthday, ma'am, as I'm a sinner.

"A sinner, indeed, Sir Jasper, and now you have it. What? Would you, sir, mate with innocence, guilelessness; lamb-like light-heartedness, and sprightliness; you with——?"

"Come, come, my Lady Kilcroney. I've not been a model husband, I dare say."

" I dare say not, sir. Heavens, my poor Julia ! "

" Your poor Julia, ma'am, would have driven a saint—Pshaw ! She was too good for me ! "

" Believe me, sir, you should wed a young lady of some experience, if not a widow ; a staid female, sir."

" Thank you, my Lady, I'm vastly obliged, I'm sure."

" And you so jealous, Sir Jasper, who could scarce even trust virtue's self, in the shape of Julia ! La, to think of you with Selina—such beauty, Sir Jasper ; such grace, such charm, so ready to take the pleasure of her years, so pure ignorant of the world's ways."

" Good heavens, my Lady Kilcroney, if I do not come to your tea-party to-morrow, 'twill be that I am a dead man."

" Do not say you were not warned," said my Lady, and had the laugh of scorn to herself to see with what conquering airs Sir Jasper glanced at himself in each mirror when, departing, he crossed the long length of her drawing-room at Queen's Lodge.

The pretty Maid-of-Honour and the already foresworn widower duly met over Kitty's bohea, next afternoon. Sir Jasper duly fell head over heels in love ; and before the week was out, they were engaged to be married. Royalty approved, my Lady Ongar gave her consent with tears of joy ; and both Susan Verney and Ann Day sent cool sisterly sanction.

Having secured her victim Kitty prepared herself to enjoy every moment of the delightful process of decking her for the sacrifice. What woman but does not feel that in the trousseau lies the true inward satisfaction of the bridal state ? To a benevolent heart like my Lady Kilcroney's the choice of Lady Selina's garments, the proper expenditure of the funds entrusted to her for the purpose by the widowed mother offered a task in which duty went hand in hand with delight. Generous soul that she was, she promptly decided to supplement the Dowager's exiguous allotment by a contribution of her own : secretly, so as not to hurt the poor child's feelings,

but to an extent which should in her estimation befit the wedding of a maid-of-honour under the protection of the Lady Kilcroney.

Needless to add that to bring Selina to Pamela Pounce was almost the first of her desires as self-elected Fairy Godmother. Who but Pamela indeed, could set out a Bride so that her appearance on the great morning should be an event in the world of Fashion? Pamela under Kitty's instructions—there never was such a combination of intellect!

My Lady Kilcroney as she drove up through the bright sunshine from Windsor was filled with anticipations so agreeable and exciting that she had little thought to spare for the silence and irresponsiveness of the girl beside her.

Selina had a delicious little countenance, even though she was sulking heavily; so when her glance strayed reflectively upon her my Lady found nothing in the contemplation to disturb her equanimity.

It was the first time in its annals that the House of Mirabel beheld a carriage with the Royal liveries halt before its portals, and the flutter in its discreet walls was indescribable,

Madame Mirabel herself catching sight of the scarlet splendour, through the first floor window, was seized with the trembles, and had to send Miss Clara Smithson for a glass of ratafia out of the back parlour cupboard before she could control her limbs sufficiently to walk downstairs. It was true that her immense agitation was promptly allayed by Miss Polly Popple, who put her head in at the door to say:

"It's only my Lady Kilcroney after all, what's brought a pale Miss for a wedding hat. So don't you put yourself about, Madame Mirabel, and Miss Pounce that cool it don't look as if her opinions were what they ought to be, and gracious goodness where is the roll of silver ribbon came from Lyons? I laid it out of my hand, Clara, when I ran up a while ago about Mrs. Lafone's bill,

and him giving all sorts in the show-room. I wouldn't be married to an elderly gentleman what's miserly not for—where's the silver ribbon for mercy's sake? There's the bell going after me like mad. Thank you, dear. Don't put yourself about, Madame Mirabel—who ever told you it was the Queen! It's only my Lady Kilcroney—drat it, there it goes again—I'm coming."

Pamela Pounce had caught a glimpse of Kitty's dainty profile behind the misleading scarlet as the Queen's barouche halted; and it was with her usual graceful self-composure that she swam forward to curtsy to her patroness. Four steps and a nicely graduated obeisance, with just an undulation which included my Lady's companion, Pamela had a perfect command of the correct attitude. Then she waved her hand.

"Chairs, Miss Popple. Pray be seated, ladies."

Then, with a pretty spring of alacrity in manner and voice, a most respectful yet delightfully confidential approach to familiarity:

"And what can I show your Ladyship to-day?" cried she. "There's the sweetest head, a twist of cherry tulle with a bunch of green grapes, just come from Paris—made for your Ladyship."

Kitty waved the tempting suggestion on one side. "Nothing for me to-day, my dear creature. I've brought Lady Selina."

Selina, who had entered, stood and sat down like an automaton with every reason to be dissatisfied with its surroundings, here gave her patroness a steely look of enmity, and then cast down her eyes so that their long eye-lashes cast a shadow on her white cheek.

Pamela appraised the small set face and Kitty proceeded to expound; "The fact is, Miss Pounce, I am here with Lady Selina for a wedding order."

"Indeed, my Lady."

"Yes, indeed," cried Kitty, warming to her subject, "the wedding hat, no less, child, and the going away! Oh! And a head for the dinner party I mean to give

in honour of the engagement. Princess Augusta has promised to attend. And the wedding is to take place from my house in Hertford Street, Pamela, the very moment May is over. What with my Lady Verney having a feeling about the mourning, and my Lady Anne Day so set about with measles in her nursery, there isn't anyone as near to this dear girl as myself, if it's reckoned by old friendship."

Here Kitty paused for breath and after duly waiting for Lady Selina to express some acknowledgments of these handsome sentiments, Pamela, in the young person's persistent mutism, was fain to remark that there was no one like her Ladyship for kindness, that she knew. And though this was but a deferential murmur, there was conviction in it. Pamela had every reason for this testimony.

Kitty glanced askance at the bride's most unbride-like countenance; she faintly shrugged her shoulders. None of the Verekers had good tempers and she was not going even to notice Selina's moods.

"A wedding hat."

Pamela pondered upon the bride, while her quick brains worked.

("Dear to be sure, the poor young lady! One would think 'twas her funeral things they were getting together. Who are they going to marry her to? And why is my Lady Kilcroney managing it all, and that mortal tickled?) I wouldn't recommend white satin for my Lady Selina," she said out loud, "though I know it's the usual thing, my Lady. And if I might venture, it wouldn't do to be putting dead white next her face. No, my Lady Kilcroney, no, my Lady Selina, not if you was to rouge ever so and *that* would be a thousand pities; my Lady's skin is a treat to look at. And it's her *cachet* to be pale with those dark eyes—excuse me, my Lady, for dropping into French, it's a way I got into in Paris. Now I'd like lace." The milliner spoke slowly as if she were tasting one by one, the condiments of an exquisite dish. "A

fine brim of real lace, my lady, with a tulle lining, three layers of tulle, and the middle one pale pink. Oh, pale, pale, pale." Pamela twiddled her fingers in the air, mitigating the colour till it faded into nothingness. " The tint they're calling in Paris, *cuisse de nymphe émue.* Excuse me, my Lady, I won't be so bold as to translate it. Yes, your Ladyship, the French have droll minds! But your Ladyship has seized the idea; not pink, but just a warmth, a lightening of the white, 'twill be exquisite. A twist of silver ribbon to hold it together—Miss Popple, where's that silver ribbon that came from Lyons? I have a model here," went on Pamela, stooping to pull out one of the deep drawers of the cupboard which ran the length of the room, and in which the most special treasures in the millinery line were hidden away from the ordinary public, only to be brought out for the favoured. " I have a model here which is the very latest, out of Paris. It'll never be seen at all, so to speak, till next month, and that on a Queen's head."

Queen Charlotte's Lady-in-waiting sprang up and tripped across the carpet to stand by the milliner's side.

" It must be worth while for a female of Fashion," my Lady was thinking, " to have a post about Queen Marie Antoinette, always the first in the land in modes and in looks as in everything else."

Now Lady Selina Vereker, hearing the two women whisper as they stood together, lifted her eyes and watched and hearkened very intently.

" The young lady's just engaged I take it," said Pamela, shaking the tissue paper from a cobweb vision of blue tulle and lace.

" 'Twas only ratified by Lady Ongar last night, from her retreat at Wimbledon. (They say it's a convent of nuns my dear, but 'tis not generally known.) "

" Dear, to be sure, the poor lady! "

Here Kitty lowered her voice, but Selina's irately keen ears caught the murmur.

" Sadly ill-provided for. My Lord Ongar's affairs in

a desperate state. Hardly a brass farthing between the three poor girls! A most prodigious relief to have the third settled."

Then Pamela's clear compassionate undertone.

"I trust the young lady is happy in her choice, so young as she looks."

The milliner's eye wandered to the Bride-elect and met her darkling gaze.

"Why, that goes without saying," exclaimed my Lady tartly, "since I made the match, Miss Pounce. Sir Jasper Standish is one of my Lord's oldest friends."

"Sir Jasper Standish! Good God!" Pamela started and wheeled round. She echoed the words in accents which left no doubt as to the consternation evoked by the name.

Her face was reflected in the glass in front of her, and Selina had a vision of its blasted expression of horror and disapproval.

The next moment Miss Pounce had resumed her usual bland self control, and was bending over the French hat, feigning to be absorbed in twitching its knotted ribbons into place.

"Upon my word, Miss Pounce," exclaimed Kitty, in high surprise and anger. "And what have you got against Sir Jasper Standish, may I ask, that you should couple his name with such impiety?"

"Oh, nothing, my Lady, nothing!"

Pamela's hands trembled as she twitched the faint pink ribbons. "Nothing but a bit of a business trouble between my father and Sir Jasper, our place being all but next door to Standish Hall—I crave your Ladyship's pardon, I'm sure, for letting my feelings go away with me,—but Sir Jasper was hard on father over a mortgage."

"Oh! a mortgage! Pish, child!" Kitty was immensely relieved, though she could not conceal that she considered it a great liberty in a milliner thus to obtrude her family affairs upon the notice of distinguished clients. She had not so very high an opinion of Jasper herself,

and Pamela was a prodigious handsome girl! She had been actually trembling over what might have come out!

My Lady's manner for the rest of the *séance* comically varied between a dignified displeasure and the overwhelming fascination exercised by the milliner's supreme talent.

Lady Selina submitted to all the trying-on and listened to the prolonged discussions with the same demeanour of angry martyrdom which she had brought into the shop.

"You're been insufferable, my dear!" cried Kitty, patience giving way at length, as the sleek royal horses started on their homeward way.

Selina turned her long, brilliant eyes upon her companion without speaking. There was a pert question and an underlying significance in them, which further exasperated the chaperone.

"'Pon honour!" exploded Kitty, "I marvel what's to do with you. You, with everything the world can give you, and three as sweet hats chosen as ever I've seen in my whole life! Such a picture as you'll look, a Bride, with your mother's lace and all! and by the airs of you, you might have been trying on sack cloth to go to the stake."

"You must remember, my Lady Kilcroney, that I am in mourning."

"Psha!"

"And Sir Jasper a widower himself."

"And what of that, child?"

"Oh, nothing," said Selina. "Do you think it's going to rain?"

Kitty looked at her long and earnestly. Was there ever such a little shut-up countenance, such obstinate close lips and such naughty secret eyes?

"I wish to Heaven," she said, at last, "that you'd say what you've got in your heart, child."

"Oh, I was just thinking about Miss Pamela Pounce!"

"And what of her?"

My Lady still uneasily remained cross.

"Oh, I only thought she looked honest!" said the girl. And not one other word to the purpose could my Lady Kilcroney extract from her.

They drove into Windsor in a strained silence and separated to their divers duties in no very cordial mood.

Kind-hearted people in positions of authority are apt to fall into the danger of doing good to their neighbours in spite of themselves. They see so clearly the value of the benefits they mean to confer, that fate having given them the power to enforce their acceptance, they do not hesitate to wield it. With the best intentions in the world they become tyrants. Kitty had a real desire to be of use to the orphan, and she was quite sure that the plans she had laid for her were entirely for her comfort and well-being. In any case matters had gone too far for Selina, even to dream of such a catastrophe as a withdrawal of her word.

The Maid-of-Honour had accepted Sir Jasper of her own free will. If she had secretly repented, if she chose to sulk and make a martyr of herself, Kitty knew better than to encourage her by seeming to notice it. And my Lady told herself that the moods of such a chit were of no account. She was too fresh out of the schoolroom to stand so much promotion all together—Maid-of-Honour, Bride-elect, the pet of royalty, all in a couple of months—a little spoilt cat, and if she scratched Jasper 'twould but do him a vast of good.

Nevertheless, my lady Kilcroney felt slightly uncomfortable until she next beheld the engaged couple together. Then, indeed—it was the next evening after their shopping drive to London, in my Lady's own rooms—Selina appeared to have completely forgotten her gloomy fit. The child was in outrageous spirits, with quite scarlet cheeks, taunting and mocking her ardent lover, till he was beside himself.

Kitty forbore rebuke. In her relief she was full of

indulgence towards behaviour which, at another time, she would have severely reprobated.

" My dear love," she wrote to her husband that night. She was still in attendance at Windsor and Denis, very much injured, was alone at Hertford Street. " Everything is going as well as possible. Do not forget to call on Mr. Gunter's about the wedding cake and on Mr. Bartolozzi about the tickets of invitation."

Could she have known how Lady Selina had employed the afternoon of that very day, the poor Lady-in-Waiting would have issued very different instructions.

For Selina had obtained leave from her " Royal " to go to town about her trousseau. The Princess Augusta, all blandness and good nature, offered every facility, even to her own carriage.

How grateful was Lady Selina ! But " Oh, no, Ma'am," she pleaded, " it makes me feel so horrid shy ! There we were yesterday, my Lady Kilcroney and I, in one of the Queen's barouches and every one turning round and staring at us, and oh ! so disappointed, Ma'am, not to see the Royal faces. My mother is sending her own maid for me, and we'll take a chaise and Sister Verney will meet me in the town."

Princess Augusta looked very kindly at the child. She liked her modest disclaimer and the little flattery it wrapped about, and it all sounded very proper and becoming. How could she guess that Selina was lying like a little devil, that the audacious creature would positively set out from the consecrated precincts of Queen's Lodge alone, take the common coach to town and proceed on foot to Bond Street ; in a kind of disguise indeed, a plain bonnet, borrowed off a Royal housemaid, which had a brown gauze veil to drop over her face, so that she might have passed her own mother in the street and not been known !

The cunning girl watched her opportunity and slipped into Miss Pounce's showroom at a slack moment. As

she flung back her veil Pamela's colour changed; she saw who it was.

Selina walked quite close up to her and the two stood a moment staring at each other. The milliner was too acuté not to feel the moment big with importance, and too shrewd not to guess at the cause.

"What did you mean," said Selina then, "by saying yesterday like that: 'Sir Jasper! good God!'?"

Pamela was not often taken-to, but she felt herself in a most disagreeable fix.

"La!" she faltered. "I could have bitten my tongue out. I can only ask your pardon."

"I want you to answer my question. What did you mean?"

Pamela, who had been growing pale, grew paler.

"Father had trouble with him over a mortgage."

"Oh, tush with your mortgage! That's only a bit of trumpery. It wasn't the mortgage. You know something of Sir Jasper."

The milliner hesitated: then she tossed her head.

"And if I do, my Lady? There! There ain't anything for you to suspect me about, I do assure you."

"Oh, I don't suspect you!" cried Selina wildly. "I see you hate him! I hate him myself! I haven't anyone to help me. What do you know of him?"

"Nothing that would count as against a gentleman's honour," said Pamela bitterly, recalling, with an inward shudder, the vile trick that had been played upon her, and the narrowness of her escape.

Selina caught the working-woman's two capable hands.

"I won't get you into a scandal! I know you've got your bread to earn. I'll never mention your name or let anyone guess! I promise! I promise! Look here, I'll put it differently: if you were me, would you marry Sir Jasper Standish?"

Pamela drew a long breath and the truth leaped.

"I'd see myself dead rather!"

The absurdity of the phrase did not detract from its effectiveness.

"Ah!" cried Selina. "Thank you! That's all I wanted to know."

She wrung the hands she had caught, whisked her veil over her flushed countenance and turned to leave. On the threshold of the shop she paused and flung back a quick reassurance.

"Don't be afraid. I'll never betray you!" which Miss Polly Popple, overhearing, promptly carried to the awestruck ears of Miss Clara Smithson.

"There's a low-class girl just been in the showroom blackmailing Miss Pounce and gone off Heaving knows with how much hushmoney! 'I won't betray you,' says she. And Miss Pounce looking after her, that distraught, you'd think she'd seen a ghost."

"Ah! my dear," said Miss Smithson. "Retribution is gathering over that abandoned creature's head."

CHAPTER VII

In which is Manifest the Hand of the Sainted Julia.

"Oh, my Lady Kilcroney, I haven't a moment! The most dreadful thing has happened!"

Selina Vereker stood before the astonished Kitty. She was robed for Court ceremonial and looked a very splendid young woman in brocaded whites and silver laces. Her hair was full dressed and spread mightily in wings and curls. In her hand she held a posy of pink roses. But against all this elegance, the small countenance looked troubled; it was, indeed, contorted like that of a child about to cry.

"I haven't a moment," she repeated. "The Princess Augusta expects me to attend her to the Duchess of Hampshire's ball, and even now she will be waiting for me. But oh, my Lady, oh, my Lady, I thought I must run in to tell you—Sir Jasper has broken with me!"

"Never say so, child! And the marriage for next Monday as ever was!"

My Lady Kilcroney was in the long, narrow parlour which formed part of her set of rooms in St. James's Palace. She, too, was in full fig; a marvel of glistening white, with the fashionable purple trimmings that proclaimed attachment to Royalty. The Bellairs diamonds shone on her throat and bodice, and diamonds shot from every angle of her piled and flying curls. At the Maid-of-Honour's words she shook and sparkled and quivered in all her finery, looking like some magic tropical bird spreading out wings for battle.

"The Princess Augusta is waiting for me!" cried Selina, and sobbed.

"Let her wait," quoth Kitty fiercely. She had enough familiarity with the Royals now to appreciate the fact that, after all, they were but human beings. "What has happened? Sit there and tell me this moment. Sir Jasper break off his engagement! Some fantastick of jealousy, sure. The man's mad! Why, 'tis but this morning you showed me that wonderful knot of brilliants he gave you, child, on your complaining you had no fancy for a dead woman's jewels."

Selina let herself fall into the chair indicated, and hid her face in her hands.

"Oh, the disgrace!" she moaned.

"It shall not be," stormed her patroness. "You've dropped your roses, child."

"What, the roses? How—did I still hold them? Oh, my Lady, the roses, 'tis they undid me!"

"Your roses undid you? Talk plain, in the name of common sense."

"The roses undid me, Madam," said Lady Selina, lifting up her head to grind her teeth at Kitty, as that lady said afterwards, for all the world like her little Denis at ten months old with the double ones coming. "How should I know that when the beautiful pink roses arrived they were not from Sir Jasper? and oh, my Lady, he came storming into my parlour, demanding to see me, and I scarce out of the hands of Monsieur Achille and going in to him in my wrapper, I do assure you, not knowing what prodigious important thing he had to say to me, and he, my Lady Kilcroney, scarce able to speak with the fierce rage. 'The roses,' he says, 'where are the roses you was to wear to-night?' And there they were, unpacked at his elbow before I had had time as much as to take them in my hand. As I'm a living woman, as I hope to be saved, my Lady, I, all innocence! 'The roses?' says I, and he falls upon them, and, oh, to think of it, in the very middle rose, hidden like a snake in the

grass, was a billet. A billet, my Lady Kilcroney, I scarce know how to tell you—from——"

"Another gentleman?" screamed Kitty, jumping to the horrid truth.

"Some stranger."

"And indeed I hope so, Miss. And what was wrote in it, pray?"

Selina dropped long white eyelids over those brilliant curious eyes of h[illegible]s which never seemed to corroborate her lips, and, drawing an immense quivering sigh, the corners of the same pretty lips going down over a sob: "Oh, my Lady, the monstrous audacity of it," she cried. "The creature wrote—God knows who he can be—

'If you wear these roses to-night, Beauteous Selina, your adorer will know that, whatever happens, he may still hope.'"

"'Pon my word," said Kitty.

"It seems Sir Jasper had had an anonymous letter——"

"Ha," interrupted the Queen's Lady-in-Waiting. "Now lift up your head, my love. 'Tis all a vile plot. An anonymous letter, say you? Why, now all is plain. 'Tis some base, envious creature—Heaven knows who!" said Kitty. "Some old flame, some wretch who wants to break the marriage for abominable designs of her own. Psha! Was there ever a grosser scheme? 'Twould not take in a mouse!"

"Sir Jasper will not listen to a word of reason," complained the bride-elect, now unveiling the fury of her eyes. "He declares that there was guilt on my face; that he had long had suspicions of me. He vows I have been cold to him, dearest Lady Kilcroney, and that matters must have gone very far between me and my lover—oh, is it not monstrous of him?—before anyone would have dared address me in such familiar words."

"You need not repeat his raving to me," cried my Lady Kilcroney decidedly. "Dry your eyes now, and

hasten to your duty. Sir Jasper in his present mood may very well not come to the ball, but he shall render an account of his folly in this very room to-morrow morning, and if the marriage does not take place from my house next Monday as arranged, I am a Dutchwoman, as complete a Dutchwoman as Mrs. Schwellenberg. I can say no more. And I trust," said Kitty, soliloquising as the door slammed on the Maid-of-Honour's exit, "and I trust you will pay Sir Jasper back for this evening's work in good ringing coin, child, once you're Lady Selina Standish. As I have no doubt you will, my love—cold-hearted, capricious?—aye, he's not so far out there—and fiery tempered to boot! It will give me a vast of pleasure to see such a buck as he proper punished and tamed!"

She herself began the process with considerable conscientiousness next morning in that interview which Sir Jasper was ready enough to grant. My Lady was tired; for to be in attendance on Royalty was to make of a ball more of a fatigue than a diversion. She was anxious, too; for the Queen had heard that it was Lady Selina's visit to Lady Kilcroney which had resulted in the Princess Augusta actually being kept waiting; and had shown displeasure at so extraordinary a breach of etiquette.

Kitty had no explanation to offer. She would have died rather than hint at the threatening scandal. So considerable peevishness had accumulated to fall upon the devoted head of Sir Jasper.

But at first that individual was beyond feeling anything save his own anguish. He roared like a wounded bull; hit his brow till the powder flew; thumped his chest till his vocal chords reverberated; paced the room, declaiming in one breath that he was infamously betrayed, and in the next that 'twas a just retribution for perjury to the best of wives. He swore that his heart was broken; never had he loved, never could he love woman as he loved the false, intriguing Selina. Then he declared that the organ in question had never been mended, but lay in fragments under the tombstone sacred to Julia.

It was only when his passion had expended itself in exhaustion that my Lady was able to make herself heard. Then she dissected the value of the evidence upon which he proposed to take so outrageous a step. She exposed the folly of his jealousy, she mocked the absurdity of the figure he cut.

"You have now," she said, "lost the finest young lady in the kingdom. You were about to contract a marriage altogether beyond what a man of your position and birth could hope for. You a middle-aged widower, of no particular title—what's a baronet?—of no such remarkable fortune, with certainly no good looks to commend you—you were about to espouse the loveliest little creature in all the world, the Queen's favourite, scarce eighteen—a beauty, sir, of the first family! And on some kind of monstrous whimsy, arising from your own bad past—oh, of that I am quite certain, Sir Jasper—you have cast away this flower, and you have cast away with it your good name, your good fame, your own claim to be a gentleman! Never will that cake be eaten for your wedding with Lady Selina Vereker, I can promise you that! Oh, she's out of conceit with you, poor child! 'Only one thing I beg of you!' she says to me. 'Do not ask me to look at him again, for I never, never can!' 'Then you shall not,' says I. I uphold her, sir, in her determination. 'You've come out of this business with flying colours, my love,' I says, 'and the Queen shall hear the whole story.' Fie, Sir Jasper, how you bellow! I have one last word to speak to you, sir, aye, indeed, the very last you shall ever hear from these lips, and that is that I scarce think there's a gentleman of your friends, when it gets about the clubs, who would deem it worth his honour to cross swords with such as you."

She made a great flounce of silk skirts as if to withdraw, but he was down on his knees clutching at them; to do him justice, less affected by her threats and the picture she had drawn of his awful position than by the realisation that he had lost his bride. Never had Lady

Selina appeared to his eyes in a light so entrancing; never did he so clearly perceive the worthlessness of his existence without her, as in this moment, when he believed he had lost her. His distress was so genuine, his supplications were so heartrending, that Kitty Kilcroney could not but let herself be mollified. She exacted every possible pledge of future good conduct, she obtained the completest retractation, the most abject and repeated apologies before sending for Selina.

When this young lady appeared Sir Jasper was put to another half-hour of torture ere he was re-admitted to favour; and even then the bride remained cold and unresponsive, and looked with a hard glitter in her eyes from one to the other, as if she had by no means forgiven her betrothed, and was scarce grateful to my Lady Kilcroney for her share in the reconciliation.

She had that moment, she informed him, sent the parcel containing Sir Jasper's presents, including the betrothal ring, by a trusted hand to his house; she vowed she considered matters vastly well as they stood; both would yet repent a return to the old terms.

Sir Jasper did not kneel to Selina. He behaved, Kitty thought, with a better dignity than she could have expected and also more intelligence. He promised perfect confidence in the future and a rope of pearls; the most tender forbearance in all difficulties and emerald earrings; the unswerving devotion of a manly heart and six Catalonian horses to the finest coach woman ever drove in. He furthermore volunteered to double his wife's pin-money, and altogether, as Lady Kilcroney informed her Denis afterwards, made a more graceful leg out of the business than could have been imagined from the gross fashion in which he had cantered in.

Lady Selina at length allowed an inert hand to lie in his clasp, and even permitted him to touch an averted cheek in token of her pardon; and it was an extremely chastened buck that wended his way out of St. James's Palace in

the direction of Bond Street, and it was a tremendous sigh of relief that my Lady Kilcroney heaved.

"Now child," quoth she, "as Mr. Shakespeare hath it, 'All's well that ends well.' But do not make the mistake of keeping up your frigid airs too long. The real way to treat the wretches is to grant a little from time to time, and demand a great deal."

"I'm much obliged to you, I'm sure, ma'am, for your kind interest," said Lady Selina, and dropped her white eyelids over her audacious cold eyes.

"*There has been another elopement,*" wrote Miss Burney, the Queen's reader, to her sister, "*and you would never believe, my dearest Susan, who and in what circumstances. Lady Selina Vereker was, you know, to wed Sir Joseph Standish, that handsome widower (scarce indeed a year widowed of his poor Julia; men are strange things! I met her once, she was a very elegant woman). Lady Selina was, as I say, dear Susan, to wed Sir Jasper this actual next Monday, and my Lady Kilcroney who, as you know, hath the kind of good-nature that is for ever interfering in other people's affairs, was to give the breakfast at her own mansion in Hertford Street. 'Twas said she made the match. 'Tis quite certain she recommended the young lady at Court. She must be vastly sorry on both these accounts now. Princess Augusta was to go to the wedding (the bride being her own Maid-of Honour); and altogether it is an odd, unpleasant business, as you will hear. Last night, then, Lady Selina attended the Royals to the Opera House. 'Twas to be her last duty of the kind, and she was ablaze, my dear, they tell me, with Sir Jasper's jewels. The poor man was infatuated. I cannot but pity him. She stood behind the Princess Augusta in the box as usual, and no one knows the exact moment of her disappearance. 'Tis positive she was present at the beginning of the third act. Then all attention was turned to the stage, and at the end of it she was nowhere to be found! Conceive it, my dearest Susan,*

to choose such a manner and such company, for such a proceeding! To me it is beyond imagination; but, from the letter she left behind her, there can be, alas! no mistake. The young gentleman for whom she has shown her preference in so singular a fashion, is, it seems, a person of no note at all; a mere officer of the Marines, by name Simpson, with scarce any fortune beside his pay. The whole affair leaves one in a state of amaze, and I verily believe the world is going mad."

On the morning following the fatal evening just described, my Lady Kilcroney was awakened from very agreeable slumbers by the urgency of Miss Lydia Pounce, who, placing a letter on the bed, begged in a tone so important that her ladyship should wake up and read it at once, that Kitty, omitting to scold, forthwith proceeded to obey.

"Lady Selina's woman also brought a large case, my Lady. I've left it in the ante-chamber."

Kitty was in Hertford Street, making ready in sweet security for the wedding festivities; yet not so secure but that her heart misgave her from the first moment of the matutinal summons; it hardly needed the mention of Lady Selina's name to confirm her instant suspicions. Yet she was ill-prepared, as she herself averred to all and sundry later, for such a revelation of mixed baseness, ingratitude and idiocy.

"You have taken so kind an interest in my affairs, my dear Lady Kilcroney," wrote the Maid-of-Honour, *"that I wish you to be the first to hear that by the time this reaches you I shall have become the wife of Lieutenant Simpson of the Royal Marines. 'Tis no sort of match for me, I am well aware, but I prefer him so infinitely to Sir Jasper Standish that, seeing no other way out of it, I have yielded to his solicitations. You may perhaps remember that when we were with Their Majesties at Brighton last month, there was a young man who used to*

stand on the Parade and stare as we went by. That was Mr. Simpson. From the moment I had accepted Sir Jasper—and indeed, it was scarce fair to put such pressure on me, and me so young—I knew I had made a great mistake. And oh, Heaven knows, how I tried to induce him to break it off! When I had succeeded at last—for 'twas I who wrote the anonymous letter about the roses, and 'twas I placed the billet-doux inside the rose (I still think 'twas a very ingenious trick), if it had not been for you all would have gone well. No one would have blamed me, as you told Sir Jasper yourself, but you would interfere, my Lady, and you brought it on again. And now, if you please, will you explain matters to Sir Jasper? I am sending the jewels to you that you may give them back. And oh, I am so glad to be free of him, and of them, and of Court I can't tell you! Oh, pray do not try your hand at match-making again, my Lady, for indeed you have no talent for it.

"Your obedient servant,

"Selina Soon-to-be-Simpson.

"I am sorry to treat my fat, good-natured Royal so. She was a kind piece. But 'tis a vile life."

"And oh, oh, 'tis she is a vile piece! Simpson! Let her be Simpson to the end and die an old woman!"

Kitty was more outraged, more incensed, more profoundly disturbed than she had ever known herself. Why, indeed, had she meddled with match-making, and who would be looked on coldly over such scandal at Court, but she? all innocence, kind heart and good nature! She had half a mind to send in her resignation and have done with it.

As for Sir Jasper, he was well served, for an odious, bullying, stupid fellow, who couldn't make himself agreeable when he had the chance of his life! *She* put herself out any more for him? *She* expose herself to the unpleasantness of breaking the news to him? Not Kitty, not my Lady Kilcroney.

The little woman made up her mind in a minute. She would go out of town. It was fine April weather. Bath would be at its best. She preferred it out of the season.

She would pass on the jilt's letter to Sir Jasper. Lydia should call a hackney coach and go round with it and the jewels at once.

"And I shall add a line," thought Kitty, "that will prevent him from coming to seek sympathy from me!"

"When you have perused the letter of Lady Selina, by this time Simpson, dear Sir Jasper," she wrote, *"perhaps you will feel as I do, that what has plucked you apart has not been either your indelicate behaviour or the young lady's capriciousness, but the hand of your sainted Julia."*

It was fortunate that there was no one in the room to hear the awful words that escaped Sir Jasper's lips when he came to this. What fell from them was the blasphemy: "Damn Julia!"

LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY.

CHAPTER VIII

In which a Wonderful Bit of Luck Comes out of Miss Pounce's Bandbox for Somebody Else

Miss Pamela Pounce, having inadvertently marred a most desirable alliance and incidentally assisted a mad elopement, told herself that it was a sad, tiresome world in which love brought trouble to high and low, and that the best thing a woman of intelligence could do, was to put such stuff out of her head and be grateful that she could work.

"Dear, to be sure," Pamela wondered, "how did people get along at all who hadn't some honest occupation to keep their silly minds off themselves?"

'Twas only to be expected that she should have such fretful faces to suit with heads and hats; disappointed mothers coming to complain that Miss's toque was the wrong shade of blue, passionate damsels vowing that the very sight of a pink rosette made them sick.

Pamela could read "as if it was wrote in print," as she said herself, the fluctuations of many an *amourette*, many a well-laid matrimonial scheme. Where her art might help she was ready with the most obliging disinterestedness; when failure had followed on her best efforts she took the despite of her disappointed clients with the utmost philosophy.

It was well that she was philosophic, for her own poor misplaced romance was going singularly ill; so ill, indeed, that it might be said to have dwindled down to nothing at all.

After his tender and respectful farewell to her on the

night of Sir Jasper Standish's Christmas ball, Pamela had hardly seen anything more of her once too ardent admirer. She told herself that 'twas all as it should be; he now understood the kind of girl she was; and his present attitude showed more true affection for her than his former light-minded persecution.

If she had been born his equal, or if she had not been, humble as she was, a creature of principle, what could have parted them? for if ever there had been love——

Pamela was very valiant, and kept her courage up with such reflections. And she found considerable distraction in her work, and quite a fund of consolation in the increased success which it was bringing to her. But when events enabled her to coax a bit of happiness to some-one else, through the witchery of her talents, it was more real satisfaction to her than the tot of the weekly accounts.

"Hats for these young ladies, Madam? Yes, Madam."

"A hat for this young lady," said Lady Amelia Vibart, severely.

She looked disapprovingly at Miss Pamela Pounce. She disapproved on principle of anyone whom she considered her inferior, and when a person belonging to the working classes was presuming enough, not only to have good looks, but to make the most of them, Lady Amelia considered it a direct attack on the prerogatives of those destined by Providence to hold a higher station. Only that she had been recommended to Madame Mirabel's shop as the one place positively, in the whole town, where any self-respecting woman of fashion could get herself a hat to be called a mode, she would have walked out of the show-room at the mere sight of this creature, so tall and self-possessed, so white and ruddy, clothed in garments that fitted an indecently fine figure to positively scandalous nicety, a creature who moved as if *she* were the condescending party, and carried taper hands each

side of her waist-ribbon, not exactly akimbo, but with an air—yes, in very truth, an air of independence.

Miss Pounce looked at her visitors reflectively; a high nosed, haughty, short, stout lady, flanked on either side by two tall daughters, the one beautiful, astoundingly so, a perfect miracle of loveliness; and the other—plain. No doubt about that; pleasant, bright-eyed, witty-looking, but plain.

"A hat for Miss?" said the milliner, her glance resting upon the less favoured but unmistakably the elder damsel.

The high-nosed lady tossed her head.

"Certainly not," she said with a glare. Here she pushed the beauty forward, "For this young lady."

She looked round for a chair, let herself subside on a velvet stool, obsequiously advanced by Polly Popple, and began to talk very volubly and pompously.

"I have been told that you have very good taste. What can you suggest for my daughter? Perhaps I had better tell you I am Lady Amelia Vibart. The Duchess of Queensberry has recommended you. I am sure that I shall find that you deserve her kind recommendation. I trust that you will. It is not my custom to come to shops myself, I generally expect to be served in my own house, but the Duchess advised me—this is Miss Jane Vibart. I think you must have heard of Miss Jane Vibart."

She paused, inflating her nostrils and fixing an ox-like stare upon the young woman, who really seemed quite independent.

Pamela turned her attentive gaze upon Miss Jane Vibart. It was perfectly true that she had heard of her, for there was a great deal of talk in the particular distinguished circle that patronised Madame Mirabel on the subject of the beautiful Miss Vibart. Something superlative, overwhelming, an absolute miracle, she was proclaimed to be; but the head milliner preferred something with a little more life and mind in it, herself. She betrayed by no sign that she recognised the overwhelming

favour and opportunity that was here bestowed upon her, but inclined her head sideways, after the most elegant millinery convention, and said: "Indeed, Madam? Certainly, my Lady," as if these were any ordinary new customers.

Lady Amelia snorted, took an immense breath, and burst into fresh volubility with, if possible, an increased pompousness.

"It is of high importance, you understand, that Miss Jane Vibart should be suited in the finest taste, I must request you to give your earnest attention to the matter. Stand forward, Jane, have I not already told you to stand forward? And you, sit down, Sarah. You're in everybody's way. Now, young woman, what do you suggest? I want something of distinction; girlish, you understand, but absolutely elegant. Everyone will be looking to see what Miss Jane Vibart is wearing. 'Tis Miss Jane Vibart's first appearance upon the Windsor Walk. I think it will be very good business for you if you suit her, It will bring you a great many orders. I trust you will consider that, young woman, and represent it to your employer."

"Excuse me, your Ladyship," said Miss Pounce, when Lady Amelia stopped for want of breath, "I am sure, speaking for Madame Mirabel, that she will be duly conscious of your Ladyship's kind patronage, which we shall do our best to deserve—Miss Popple, bring me the primrose set, if you please," and as the assistant sped away, Pamela looked out of the window and remarked that it was a fine day. Now it was exactly according to the best tradition of shop etiquette that the customer's attention should be respectfully distracted during an enforced wait, by some polite conversation; and, indeed, most of Miss Pounce's ladies had a good deal to say and a good deal to listen to, when fortune favoured them with a quiet moment in Miss Pounce's company, but Lady Amelia gazed upon the milliner with an arrogance that marked her repressive intention, and then turned her

head away and told Sarah to give her seat to Jane or the child would look a fright for the rout to-night.

" Dear, to be sure," thought Miss Pounce, " to see that poor piece jump up, and her younger sister take her seat, all as if it were the most natural thing in the world, if *that* don't tell a tale ! I wish 'twas the plain one I had the hatting of, I'd get some credit out of it. Why, if you put a sun bonnet on the beauty there, she'd look out of it, no more nor less than the same handsome doll—you've dropped your *mouchoir,* Miss."

Pamela handed the elder Miss Vibart back her useful linen handkerchief with a movement as deferential as if it had been the finest gossamer and valenciennes ; and that young person took it with a pleasant smile, blew her nose in it lustily, and thrust it into her reticule, no whit ashamed of its sensible quality.

" That's the girl for my money," thought the observant shopwoman.

What a world in miniature was this show-room of hers ! Pamela had already seen many a comedy, many a drama played out in it. Here was a case of Cinderella on the wrong sister. A shame it was to treat a nice young lady so, because she happened to have a little pug nose and a wide mouth.

" La ! Miss Popple, give me that. (One would think you'd had to go to Paris for it.) And straight from Paris it is, my Lady, and all the trouble in the world to get it through, things being as they are over there—as straight," said Miss Pounce, turning up her fine eyes, " as any confection in this establishment. The newest idea, Madam. Hat, robe and trimmings, down to the parasol all complete, all in harmony, as you perceive. The ve—ry lat—est id—e—a," said the milliner, dropping her syllables one by one, spreading the flounces and frills over a chair and poising the hat on her clenched hand. " Ex—qui—site, that's the word, isn't it, Miss ? O, it will become either of your young ladies to perfection. The embroidered lawn, very delicate, very girlish, Madam.

Absolutely correct for a young lady that's a *débutante.* Not white, Oh, no, your Ladyship, cream. Pull up the blinds over there, Miss Popple.—Cream, a shade deeper than ivory, and the pale green ribbons, the blonde, your Ladyship sees, just flung over the hat and fastened with this bunch of primroses. Did your Ladyship ever behold anything more fanciful and pretty? I would not put a bit of ribbon or set another pin into that hat," said Miss Pounce, " not if you was to offer me a thousand pounds to do it! Oh, Paris ma'm. Yes, ma'am. Hot from Paris if one can use such a word for a thing so cool and April-like. Any young girl," said Miss Pounce, not without a spice of malice, " would be noted in such attire."

" O Mamma," said Jane. It was the first time she had spoken. She was gazing at her reflection in the mirror, crowned by the wonderful hat. Her voice was awestruck, as if she were overwhelmed by the sight of her own loveliness.

Lady Amelia pursed her lips, and then with some tartness bade her daughter turn round. As she obeyed, Miss Pounce seized the vapoury gown and cunningly held it up against the young lady's figure. A kind of maternal greed obviously struggled with prudence in Lady Amelia's heart. She gaped meltingly, then frowned, put her finger to her lip.

" Miss could try them all on," insidiously suggested Pamela Pounce.

" O Mamma," said Miss Jane Vibart, and:

" O Mamma," cried her sister. " Jenny looks a perfect picture in that hat, and I'm sure the dress is the most lovely thing I've ever laid eyes on. It would be a sin and a shame not to get them for her."

But Lady Amelia was not so swiftly moved to decision. The garment was tried on and the beautiful Jane was turned and twisted in every direction; while her mother hummed and ha-ed and criticised.

" I'm not so sure I like the green waist-ribbon, no, nor the primroses, neither, mere hedgerow flowers. A

nice artificial garden rose, now, and a good blue taffety sash."

"O Mamma," protested the plain Miss Vibart in tones of anguish.

"I couldn't do it, your Ladyship," said Pamela, with a slightly heightened colour, deftly whisking the hat from the fair head and motioning her underling to conduct the patient back behind the screen.

"It's the primrose and the green—your Ladyship will excuse me—that makes the real Parisian elegance of this gown. If your Ladyship requires ordinary English taste, there's Madame Flouncer's in Clarges Street, a very respectable firm, very respectable indeed, as I've heard tell, where your Ladyship would find herself better suited."

"Upon my word, young woman!" spluttered Lady Amelia.

"Yes, you may toss your old head, and sniff and snort, my Lady Amelia," thought the shopwoman, remaining herself quite imperturbable, save for that deepening colour, "but you'll not come it over me with your high nose and your country taste, and you needn't think it."

They gazed upon each other steadily for nearly a minute, then the dowager's glare wavered.

"It's an original effect of colour, I'll say that," she said weakly, "and—does that parasol go with it?"

Miss Pounce took up the minute article in question, shook out the fringe, opened it, and held it gracefully at divers angles.

"An ivory handle, your Ladyship perceives, cream *poult de soie* of the first quality, the sarcenet lining beautifully gathered, isn't it, Miss? a deeper shade of primrose, so becoming to the complexion, and such a background for the powder—really as never was."

"An ivory handle," said Lady Amelia, pulling a long upper lip, "and fringe and what not! Absurd extravagance for a girl."

"It goes with the whole inspiration, my Lady. A cheap

parasol or a wrong colour would—Foh! would destroy it all."

After which Lady Amelia fell to haggling. She demanded a personal interview with Madame Mirabel. She declared that the advantage to the firm of clothing the beautiful Miss Jane Vibart, if not sufficient compensation in itself, ought to make a considerable difference in the charges made.

Miss Pounce regretted that Madame Mirabel was not visible. Madame Mirabel could not be troubled on these matters. She who spoke was solely responsible for the department. She regretted that she could not regard the favour of clothing Miss Jane Vibart otherwise than as a business transaction. What was the price? Nothing! Twenty-five guineas—given away! Oh, no, my Lady, she did not think she could use up a square of her ladyship's old Honiton instead of the blonde. No, nor make it twenty guineas and throw in the parasol. It was a tremendous contest. Lady Amelia haggled with a zest and energy that spoke of long practice and an actual enjoyment of the process. Miss Pounce's cheeks were flaming when the transaction was at last concluded, and she had after all gracefully conceded a reduction of five pounds.

("And let it be a lesson to you, my dear," she said to Miss Popple afterwards. "And when you see a customer come in with that kind of an air about her, put it up to her at once. What was the set marked at, Miss Popple, dear? Eighteen? You don't say? Well, let that be a lesson to you.")

"And do you want nothing for Miss?" enquired the astute milliner, turning with a kind smile to the plain girl. "I've a positive sweet of a Tuscan straw with cornflowers, and a blue muslin. It would suit Miss to a charm. Very reasonable."

Lady Amelia, one stout foot poised for departure—she had a high aristocratic action suited to her nose—paused.

" Cheap ? did you say ? " she questioned.

" Miss Popple, the blue muslin and the assorted *chapeau.*"

Lady Amelia gazed through her eyeglass and Pamela rejoiced to see that she hesitated. Colour and sparkle had risen to the plain Miss Vibart's cheeks, and the flash of joy brought out all kinds of beauties ; dimples, and tiny smile waves, and an archness in the curve of that too wide mouth over milk white teeth.

" *Chapeau* and *robe,*" she said emphatically, " for you, my Lady, since your Ladyship has already so generously patronised us, and not to disappoint the young lady, eight guineas. Pray Miss, let my Lady see you in the hat."

Her hands lifted to her country straw, Sarah Vibart paused, looked at her mother, and the light died out of her eyes.

" Jane, you will want another gown," muttered Lady Amelia. " And blue was always your colour."

" O Mamma," said Jane, with a smile of joy that made her for the moment quite exasperatingly lovely.

It was that smile that settled her in Miss Pounce's opinion.

" Of all the mean, unnatural girls ! 'Tis a shame, I call it, a shame ! " thought she.

If her business conscience would have allowed her, she would have placed the Tuscan on the beauty's head, and contrived to give the curls a good tweak as she did so. But as it was, she masked her feelings by handing the garments to her underling, loftily commanding : " You carry on with the order, Miss Popple. Regretting Madam, I have an appointment," and sweeping majestically away.

As she did so, she in her turn dropped a pocket handkerchief, quite a dainty little article with an embroidered P. and a delicate edge of lace, smelling too of the lavender with which the Kentish mother kept her elegant town daughter liberally supplied.

The plain Miss Vibart made a plunge and picked it up.

"Good God, Sarah!" cried Lady Amelia, the exclamation jerked out of her by a proceeding so very unbecoming.

"Thank you, Miss," said Pamela, looking into the candid green eyes, that refused to acknowledge the rising tears. "I hope some day I'll have the dressing of you, and 'twill be a pleasure and privilege."

"Jane," cried her mother angrily, "don't stand staring, and if you poke like that I might as well throw all the money into the sea. Try on the hat this minute, and you may tell Madame Mirabel—you—you young woman—that I consider it very impertinent of the person who presides over the department to go away like this; a vast bit of disrespect, and I've half a mind to cancel my orders. Hold your tongue, Jane. I would, if it were not that it might hurt the Duchess's feelings."

In spite of Lady Amelia's censure, it was scarce a fortnight afterwards when a very small page boy brought a very large folded sheet to Madame Mirabel's shop, marked immediate, which he was enjoined to deliver straight into the hands of Miss Pounce. This document ordered with equal imperativeness and urgency, that Madame Mirabel's principal woman should instantly proceed to 6a, Queen Street, bringing a selection of heads suitable for Miss Jane Vibart's wear that night at the masked ball at Hampshire House. "*It is very important that the principal woman should come HERSELF.*" This was heavily underlined. "*Lady Amelia Vibart must insist on her personal attendance.*"

"Hoighty, Toighty," said Miss Pounce, and stood looking down at the page with one hand on her hip, eyelids drooping, a quizzical smile, and a tilted chin.

"And how'd it be if I can't give up my Duchesses and Marchionesses to whom I've been engaged for goodness gracious knows how long? There, trot along, and

tell my Lady I'll do my best, seeing she's so pressing! Yes, yes. I'll come. And shut your mouth, little boy, in the name of Heaven, or you'll be picked up for a frog and brought to the Royal Aquarium."

Number 6a, Queen Street was a small narrow house wedged in between two larger residences; one of those domiciles that seem made for the impecunious fashionable. Miss Pounce serenely preceded Madame Mirabel's liveried porter who negotiated an alarming array of bandboxes, not without some bumpings, up the narrow stairs, in the wake of the country footman. On the second floor landing she ordered the important chattels to be deposited, and bidding the porter have a hackney in half an hour, stood a monument of composure while the country footman knocked at the panels of the door.

There was a clamour within, voices, among which Lady Amelia's didactic tones could easily be distinguished, objurgations, lamentations, sobs. The footman invited Miss Pounce by a leer to share the joke, knocked louder, and at an exasperated "Come in," flung open the door. As Pamela entered the long, dingy bedroom a silence fell.

The beauty was sitting in an arm-chair by the empty fire-place, her face buried in her hands, evidently in tears; the elder sister was bending over her with a countenance of concern, while in the background stood a frightened-looking elderly maid, her finger to her lip.

"Come in, come in!" repeated Lady Amelia, bursting into speech. "Shut the door. I'm sorry to have troubled you, I'm sure. No. I don't want the bandboxes. Miss Jane Vibart cannot possibly go out to-night. She has most successfully contrived to make such a spectacle of herself that I doubt if she will be able to show again for the rest of the season."

"Oh, Mamma!" exclaimed the elder daughter in reproachful accents. "'Tisn't Jenny's fault!"

"You'll not say it's mine, I trust?" retorted a deeply annoyed parent, and, as the beauty lifted her face, Pamela saw that it was indeed disfigured almost out of recognition

by that distressing if not alarming complaint, the toothache. The poor girl's left cheek was swollen to comicality.

Jane Vibart, with a loud boo-hoo, buried her head in her handkerchief again, and Sally, with a championship which Pamela thought the younger ill deserved, protested: "But Mamma, Mr. Tugwell hurt her so dreadfully last time, that poor Jenny was terrified——"

"Foh! I've no patience with her," stormed the lady. "She'll have to have it out now, and 'twill hurt her a vast deal more. Provoking creature, and it is so important, so particularly important that she should go to-night. Well, Miss, if you lose your chance of the match of the year, you've none but yourself to blame, and let that be a comfort to you. Pray, young woman, did you not hear me say I should not require your goods? O! I could shed tears of vexation, and it all so neatly planned! The Duchess herself would have seen that you took the floor with Mr. W., and says she to me: 'The child has but to unmask at supper, and I think we may say 'tis as good as done.' Mr. W., his uncle's heir, and such a personable, worthy young man, by all accounts, and looking to be settled. Well, well! Meeking, take Miss Jane to her apartment, and tell Mrs. Martha to apply the leeches. 'Tis time for me to be dressing."

Whether rendered irritable by pain, or overwhelmed by disappointment at the probable loss of Mr. W., or goaded by the thought of the leeches, certain it is that the afflicted daughter broke out with a passion which amazed Miss Pounce so much that she turned on the threshold to stare, and perhaps even admire.

The beauty declared that Mamma was a nasty unkind thing, and that she herself wished she was dead.

"Jane!" cried Lady Amelia, in a voice of thunder. "Sarah, take your sister away."

Ere the sobbing girl, advancing in three totters and a stop to gasp, could reach the door, Lady Amelia

bethought herself of a fitting punishment which spoke volumes for the matron's methods of education.

"Your sister shall go in your place to-night. Yes, Jane, not another word. I have quite made up my mind. Sarah, get ready to accompany me."

Pamela slipped out of the room after the girls, and was witness on the landing of a small fraternal scene which confirmed her previous opinion of the lovely Jane. This aggrieved maiden first nearly fell over the bandboxes, and then was seized by such a convulsion of rage and jealousy at sight of them, that, shaking herself free of Sarah's encircling arm, she slapped and pinched her sister, and then, at Pamela's horrified interference, dashed up the staircase to her own chamber.

"'Pon my word," thought the milliner, "Mr. W. may have had the escape of his life! A doll lined with a vixen! 'Tis the most dismal combination. Don't cry, Miss," she went on aloud, as Sarah sniffed into her useful pocket handkerchief, "don't cry, there's a dear young lady! Let me come in your room with you, and see what I've got in these boxes. You shall look nice to-night, or my name's not Pamela Pounce."

Now Sarah's chamber happened to be a narrow slit at the back of her mother's apartment, for of course Beauty had to be well lodged, no matter how pokily plain Miss Sarah might fare.

Nipping a bunch of bandboxes dexterously in each hand, Pamela bundled after the astonished Cinderella into her dingy little cell.

"As for the price, Miss, bless you," she whispered breathlessly, with her back against the door. "You'll pay me when you're married." Then she smacked her lips as if the dish of her choice were spread before her. "I don't know when I've took to anyone as I've took to you. La! We must have candles though, your window giving on a shaft as I see, and being, so to speak, worse than none. But I'd rather dress a lady by candlelight,

any day in the year. And what was you thinking of wearing, Miss ? "

" O dear, I'm sure I don't know ! " cried Sarah. " My muslins are dreadful washed out, and Mamma said I must do with her mauve Tabby made over, for she couldn't afford to dress two——"

Here there came a knock at the door, and Meeking, the drab elderly maid, entered, carrying a white silk brocade gown, powdered over with little rosebuds.

" My Lady says you're to wear this, Miss Sally, and I'm mortal glad," added the woman, dropping her voice and looking, as if for support, at the milliner, " that you should come to your rights once in a while ! Too bad the way this pore young lady's put upon, Miss. There ! I've said it now, and I'm glad of it. Her Ladyship's just given me notice. I wish I could dress you, Miss Sally, I do indeed, but I've got to go back to your Mamma this instant minute."

" Don't you put yourself out, Ma'am," cried Miss Pounce, sweetly. " I'll help your young lady with all the pleasure in life ! I was just about to show her the heads I brought on approval."

" Ah ! " said the Abigail darkly, as she withdrew, " there's heads enough in this house to-night, and that's the truth ! "

" I hardly like, though," exclaimed Sarah, " to wear poor Jenny's clothes."

" Why, you're a sweet creature ! " The milliner shook out the glistening folds. " 'Twill suit you, Miss——"

" Oh, my ugly face ! "

" Ugly ! As far as that comes to, Miss Vibart, there's ugly beauties, and there's charming—well, charming uglinesses, since that's your own word. I'd never call a lady ugly who'd so fine a figure, and so bright an eye—and if your mouth is a bit wide, Miss, sure your teeth are a picture ; and if your nose is a trifle snub, there's something so merry and arch in the way it cocks when you

smile, that I for one would not have you different. I vow I would not!"

Pamela was in the act of passing the Beauty's fine gown over Cinderella's shoulders, and as she twitched it into place she proceeded with fresh energy.

"What's the matter with you, Miss, is that you've been so set aside that you're afraid to smile and be merry. Let yourself go to-night, and you'll see——"

"Why, 'twill be right enough," said Sarah ruefully, "so long as I'm masked—all the dancing ladies are to be masked, you know. I'm not afraid but I can hold my own then. 'Tis the thought that all the while people are looking at me they're saying 'poor girl,' and comparing me with sister. However I may get on with my partner at the rout to-night, the moment I take off my mask——"

"Now, don't go for to say that, Miss! You haven't seen the head I've got in this bandbox. One would think," cried the milliner enthusiastically, "that your good angel had inspired me, for I've got here the very mode to match Miss Jane's brocade and to suit you. Well, there! there won't be no gentleman at the ball to-night, wishing you was your sister. I'll take my oath o' that."

And indeed, when some twenty minutes later the plain Miss Vibart contemplated her image in the glass, she conceded that she might very well hold her own. By a couple of twists of clever fingers, Pamela Pounce had contrived to loosen and display her curls to an advantage hitherto undreamt of. When a hairdresser was called in, his services were not wasted on Sarah. And the "head"; what an exquisite indescribable trifle, and how becoming! The twist of silver tissue as light as the most delicate cloud, the single hint of blue, and the one full pink rose! It lent an ethereal aspect to the flying curls of powdered hair; Sarah's small round face took a something elfin, and, as she smiled at herself, roguish, that made the milliner clap her hands and vow that she

was delicious, and that her own anticipations were far exceeded.

Sarah turned and hugged her unexpected friend before obeying her mother's call.

" I'll come round to Madame Mirabel's in the morning and tell you all about it. See if I don't."

Miss Sarah Vibart looked so modest and inconspicuous as she slipped into Madame Mirabel's hat shop on the thundery June morning after the Masked Rout at Hampshire House, that Miss Popple deemed it not worth her while to enquire what her pleasure might be.

" Foh ! " thought Polly. " Some poor country cousin on the spy for fashion," for no one can be so haughty as the young person who caters for the high and mighty.

What was her surprise to see the head milliner conclude the affairs of a most important dowager in perfunctory haste, with a peremptory, " Door, Miss Quigly," and advance with the most urgent courtesy to the customer in the plain print gown, with the unmistakable home-trimmed hat, and the not at all pretty face underneath it !

" Step with me into the dressing-room, Miss Vibart. I've got your *matinée* ready to fit on," said Pamela, with a knowing wink.

And when the two found themselves together in the little screened off apartment with the big mirror, Miss Pounce scanned her companion's face with the most searching anxiety. There was something in that face that had not been there before, an emotion between trembling joy and crucial doubt ; a colour that fluctuated, a vague and veiled glance. And a smile that wavered.

" Well, Miss ? " panted Pamela, as the girl, letting herself fall into a chair, seemed to float away on a dream : " well, Miss, how did you enjoy of yourself ? Wasn't my head the prettiest there by a long way ? I don't think the Duchess herself had such a bit of real art, and I ought to know ! I'm sure, if you only looked as you

did upstairs in that little room when you took off your mask——"

"Oh, you dear kind thing, I never took off my mask at all."

"What, Miss?"

"Oh, I couldn't!"

"Of all the pities! There, I might as well have spared my trouble, I see. There ain't a mite of use in trying to help those that won't help themselves, that's flat!"

"Nay, pray, pray don't be vexed with me! You've been such a friend to me! You're the only friend I have! Oh, I must tell you! There's no one in the world I can tell."

There was such real distress in the girl's whole air, and at the same time, some pathetic hope that seemed to cast a pale beam across her trouble like sunshine on a gloomy day, that Pamela swallowed down her natural irritation and began to feel moreover that her efforts might prove to have been not so altogether wasted after all. More than this, how could she fail to be touched by the appeal: "You are my only friend"? Flattered, too, considering—and Pamela was far too sensible not to consider—the difference in their station.

"Oh," cried the plain Miss Vibart, as if the gentle look the milliner cast on her had been a Moses wand and the spring gushed forth under its touch. "Oh pity! Oh, why am I not beautiful, like Jane? I never envied her before—never, never—but oh, why did I go to the party at all? If I hadn't known him first, if he had not been so wonderful kind and clever and charming and loving to talk to me, and understanding me so—oh, oh, and so handsome! Oh, I'd never have known what he was if Jane had had him first!"

"There, don't cry, you poor thing! Why, now, you said you'd tell me about it, Miss, and I'm sure, I think it uncommon pleasant of you, Miss, and I'd never take advantage—no! 'Twill be as sacred—as sacred—no not if I was to be drawn and quartered! But there,

Miss, why, how do you know 'tisn't all going to end lovely? How do you know the gentleman isn't like me and wouldn't rather have you than the beauty, fifty thousand times?"

Here came such a lifting of swimming eyes, such a timid smile that Pamela thought she, for one, never wanted to see anything sweeter than the face of the plain Miss Vibart.

And after that the confidences came, broken, halting, but explicit enough for such quick wits as those of Madame Mirabel's head woman. How Sarah had followed her mother, with a higher heart than she had ever carried in her bosom to any entertainment, into the great, splendid ball-room of Hampshire House, safe under her mask: and they had scarce been there a five minutes when up comes the Duchess of Queensbury in a great fuss, followed by a tall young gentleman, and she says to Mamma, for the Duchess is Mamma's cousin by marriage, and has remembered the relationship since Jane came out, for Jane, she says, is the most beautiful creature in the world and "so she is," cried the loyal sister, breaking off her narrative with a trembling lip.

"'Tis the young gentleman's looks I want to hear about," Miss Pounce interpolated skilfully. "Mr. W—— I suppose? Him your lady Mamma was alluding to."

"Mr. W. it was, Mr. Walsingham. And oh, he's a person of great consequence, for he's the nephew and heir of the old Marquis of Harborough, him that succeeded his brother, you know, and none of them ever married. And oh, dear, my dear friend—your name's Pounce, isn't it? I'd rather call you by your Christian name if you don't mind. Pamela? Oh, I like that. Dear Pamela, I thought when the Duchess introduced him and he bowed and smiled I'd never seen anything so agreeable, nor so well looking. With such straight and honest eyes and so kind a smile. And the Duchess was in such a fuss, as I told you, she wouldn't listen to Mamma who wanted to explain about Jane, and I think she's a

little deaf, too. 'Here, Edward,' she cries, 'here's Miss Vibart, what I've told you of and you'd better engage her at once, for once it gets about what face is behind that mask, there'll be twenty clamouring for her. Oh, you're a lucky dog,' says she—that's the way she speaks, and I think it's rather gross, but Mamma won't have it, because she's a duchess—'Oh, you're a lucky dog,' she cries, 'and there won't be a buck in the room that won't want your blood when midnight comes and that face is revealed.'"

"Dear, to be sure," said Pamela, with a sucking breath. "And do you think Mr. W.—I can't help it, Miss, I shall always call him that: 'tis so mysterious like—didn't hear what your Mamma tried to tell the Duchess? Did he take you for your sister straight off?"

An overwhelming blush spread over the plain Miss Vibart's face.

"Oh, Pamela Pounce," she cried, "'twas very silly and cowardly of me, but I didn't want him to find out. I thought for once I'd know, even on false pretences, what it means to be admired and courted. And oh, my dear creature, yes, I'll be truthful. I liked him so much from the very first that I couldn't, I couldn't make up my mind to his going away and leaving me."

In the pause which ensued, the milliner discreetly waited while last night's heroine once again fell into a retrospective muse. Suddenly the girl broke out:

"'Twas the strangest thing! Our tastes met at every point. 'Never think, sir,' cries I to him, 'to find me entertaining company, for I'm the veriest country mouse ——' 'Country!' cries he. 'Madam, there's no life for anyone but in the country to my mind. This town existence, what is it? How can anyone but an idiot substitute the fresh air and the green fields and the fine views and the wholesome activities, the pleasant neighbourly intercourse, for this inane round of dissipations in the atmosphere of smoke, the hideous confinement of brick and mortar and the feverish intercourse with

strangers between people who can have naught in common, and as like as not can never meet again ? "

" La," cried Pamela, " how you remember it all, Miss ! And sure, to my mind, 'twas scarce an auspicious opening."

" Nay, but it was, for it set me off laughing. And, cries I, an idiot and inane ! ' You're vastly obliging, sir, but pray remember that I, at least, am subject to authority.' ' And so am I, madam,' cried he, ' 'tis by my uncle's orders that I am in the town, so you and I may perhaps call ourselves the only sane people in a room full of vapidity. And such being the case,' he went on, ' you will allow me to add most respectfully that we scarce meet altogether as strangers, and that I trust our first meeting may not be the last.' "

The milliner gave a whistle.

" Quick work," quoth she, " a'most like putting on the feathers before the straw is stitched together."

" Oh, nay indeed ! " cried the other again, " we were somehow so comfortably at home with each other from the first ! And after we had danced a minuet—it is not vanity on my part to say that I can dance and that better than dear Jane, though, to be sure, it scarce matters how she steps for none will look but at her face—we got on amazing in the figures, and afterwards better still in the talk we had together. Never was there such harmony of taste, I do assure you ; I told him how vastly I preferred the country gentlemen to the town fop, and he told me the town young lady could never hold a candle to the fresh country creature that would be up betimes in the dairy, and still room. And oh, a dairy is all my joy, and as to a still-room why, I scarce know how the time flies, once I'm in ours ! Our housekeeper is very old, and Mamma is very kind and lets me help her. And there's no butter half so good as mine in the county, and the dear cows, I love the very sight of them. Aye and I can milk, too. And there's not a herb in the garden I don't know the use of. And——'

" Why, Miss," said the milliner, amused, " what a mistress you'll be of a country house of your own, one of these days ! "

" Why, that's what he said ! "

" Did he indeed ? " Pamela laughed out loud.

" Nay, but," the girl's face, which had wonderfully brightened, fell ; " You must remember he thought I was the Beauty all the time ! He has heard about Jane. 'Tis quite clear. He is in love with her without ever having seen her, and that was why the more charming, the more ardent, respectfully ardent, he was, the more my heart sank. Though indeed I do think our minds were in sympathy, and to be sure, sister scarce knows rhubarb from angelica, or cream cheese from curds."

" Ah, if I'd been you," said Pamela Pounce with fire, " I'd have pulled my mask off, Miss, and faced him and said, ' By your tongue you're a man of sense, show yourself one by your eyes.' "

" Oh, you may talk," Sarah cast a desperate upward glance at the kindling face : " you that's so handsome ! Little you know what it is to feel plain. 'Tis as I have told you, I couldn't, aye—that's the word !—face it. And so I slipped from him, even as all the assembly was summoned to the supper room, and hid myself. And oh," cried Sarah, between laughing and crying, " when Mamma found me at last, sitting with the maids among the cloaks, she was very angry first. ' And where have you been ? ' cries she. ' The Duchess and Mr. W. have been looking for you everywhere. Mr. Walsingham's mad after you, child,' and oh," here Sarah sobbed, " she was most angry because she thought he had liked me too much. And when I told her he took me for sister, ' why,' said she, ' put on your mask this minute, Miss. And I forbid you ever to let on that you took Jane's place. He has told the Duchess that you're the most intelligent young woman, that your mind and your principles are all he could desire—believing you to be Jane of course. Things could not be better ! His intentions are most serious ! '

And now," cried Sarah, drying her eyes desperately, " Sister's had her tooth out this morning, and the apothecary says in a week there'll be nothing to show for it. And though there's been a message from the Duchess to say Mr. W. wished to call to-day, Mamma has wrote back that Jane has taken a cold at the masked ball and must keep her room for a few days. But oh, Pamela, when he comes and looks upon her—why, you can guess how it will be ! "

"'Tis a monstrous shame," the partisan exclaimed. " I wouldn't put up with it, Miss. And all the time 'tis yourself he'll think he's getting. You ought to up and tell him straight and let him make his choice."

But Sarah, pulling on her shabby gloves and drawing her hat over her red eyes, shook her head. " I couldn't do that," said she. " Mamma says if I breathe a word 'twill be the basest treachery to sister. And she'll keep me out of the way," she added under her breath.

The girl then flung her arms round the milliner's neck. Sarah was indeed lacking in propriety.

" I'll send back your head. 'Tis as fresh as ever. And thank you a million times. At least I've had a peep into happiness."

It was quite ten days later when Pamela Pounce received an urgent message from Miss Vibart to come and see her after closing hours.

" Mamma and Jane are going out and I shall be quite alone. Do come, I have something so strange to tell you."

Miss Pounce did not need to be bidden twice to such an appointment. Her warm heart had been considerably preoccupied on the subject of the plain Miss Vibart's affairs.

She was shown in, not to the fireless dark slit of a room overlooking the shaft, but to quite a comfortable small bedroom on the street. Sarah, in an elegant white

muslin wrapper, sprang up from her writing-table to embrace her friend.

" Yes, yes, look at me ! " she cried. " I ain't ashamed of my face to-day. Indeed I quite love it. Oh, I've just been writing to all the dear old people at home, my blessed old nurse and Mrs. Comfit—that's our good housekeeper—to tell them—to tell them my great news ! Oh, Pamela, I wanted to tell it by degrees and surprise you, but I can't. 'Twill out ! It is me he wants."

" Mr. W. ? "

" My own dear, darling Edward Walsingham, who else ? Oh, was there ever such a lucky girl ? Oh, Pamela ! Here, sit beside me. Let me hold your hand. Let me hold your hand, your warm, dear hand that lifted me up, when I was oh, in such a pit of despond."

The two sat together on the maiden's bed, and Pamela began to cry, as women will, over the tender emotions of the moment.

" I'm as glad, my dear," she said, " as glad as if you'd given me a hundred thousand pounds. Gladder ! And, how did it come to pass ? " she drew her sucking breath of delighted anticipation.

" This morning, then—oh, when I think it was only this morning !—sister being quite unswollen and looking lovelier than ever, Mamma put her into the blue muslin—your blue muslin, you remember it ?—and made Meeking do her hair in a new way with a black ribbon bow at the back and little curls, like the Duchess of Devonshire, and oh, sister did look lovely ! And just as she was ready, up comes Joe Footman to say the Duchess of Queensberry and Mr. Walsingham was in the withdrawing-room. And Mamma takes sister by the hand and ' Come, child,' says she. ' And if you poke when you come into the room I'll slap you.' (Sister does poke sometimes you know.) And off they go, without so much as a look at me. I'd been helping to dress sister, you see, holding the hairpins and that. And there was I in my old frumpy gown, and I just looked at myself in the glass and I thought : ' You

plain thing, how dare you be jealous of beauty, and your own sister, too!' And if you cry, you silly creature, you'll only make yourself plainer, so what's the good of that!' And I wouldn't cry, dear. I picked up sister's clothes and was putting them away, trying not to think. Oh, trying so hard not to think—of him downstairs, looking worship at Jane, when all at once up comes Joe Footman again. 'And you're to come down, Miss, you're to come down this minute to the withdrawing-room. Her Ladyship has sent for you.' And oh, you'll never believe the dreadful thought that came into my head and how near I was saying I would not obey Mamma, for to tell you the truth, I thought she wanted to show off Jane with my plainness. But then I thought, 'Nay, daughters must do as they're bid,' and I set my teeth and down I went, just as I was. Oh, Pamela, such an untidy, ill-dressed poor girl, with a sad pale face! And oh—I can hardly believe it myself—the moment I came into the room up he jumped—yes, he, Mr. W.—and I heard him cry out quite joyful: 'Ah, I knew I could not be mistaken. Ah, 'tis she, 'tis she indeed!' And then he took both my hands in his and kissed them one after the other very respectful. And says he, 'Forgive me, Madam, forgive me! Your mother will explain. It has been an absurd misunderstanding. I found a treasure, and I thought I had lost it. Oh, forgive me if I seem too precipitate!' And Jane got up and went to the window and began to tap on the pane, and Mamma and the Duchess looked at each other. And the Duchess said: 'I congratulate you, Amelia, this is the most crazy bit of good fortune that ever befell a mother.' And everything did seem rather crazy, for there was Mamma at one minute looking as if she could kill me and at the next clasping me and calling me her favourite child. And oh," went on the plain Miss Vibart, "it is precipitate, but what does that matter, when we're both so happy? And oh, it seems I must tell you, and 'tis not vanity! that the moment he saw Jane he stared and looked so mortal disappointed and seemed so confused,

falling back two steps indeed, instead of coming forward, that the Duchess cried: 'What's the matter with the fellow? Ain't she pretty enough?' And he said: 'This is never the young lady to whom you introduced me at Hampshire House, ma'am. There is some cruel mistake here,' he says. And oh, he said to me, when we were alone together a little while ago that when he saw that empty face—that's what he said—that doll's face, that bit of waxwork, his blood ran cold, and then says he: 'When you came in!'—oh dear, I'm not dreaming!—'When I saw your charming expressive countenance, full of life and spirit and wit and goodness'—he did say that—'I could not hold myself back, I had to speak at once, lest I lose you again.' And now," concluded the future Marchioness, turning her radiant visage upon the milliner, "he's gone to Harborough House to tell his uncle, and Mamma and Jane have gone out to a dinner party, and if you'll help me into my frock, dear—yes, it is one of poor Jane's—I'll be ready for him when he calls back, to wish me good night."

CHAPTER IX

In which Miss Pamela Pounce has done with Love

Pamela Pounce was nothing if not a business woman, as her history will have shown. She had not only those valuable intuitions which divine the public taste, she had the still more priceless quality of inspiring it.

Before she had completed her first year with Madame Mirabel, the millinery department had become the mainstay of the house; and Pamela felt herself in a position to hint to her employer how very much more it would be to their mutual advantage that she should be given a proprietary share in the business, than that she should set up for herself.

Set up for herself! The mere thought of such a catastrophe put Madame Mirabel in such a flutter that she had to be revived with ratafia on the spot. There was no concession that she would not have been willing to make to prevent it.

Pamela had prepared a scheme, which was just, fair-minded and practical, like herself. She was willing to invest a thousand pounds for the development of the department, and continue to direct the thriving showroom, if Madame Mirabel would admit her as partner with a right to half profits.

A sketch of an agreement was drafted between them, drawn up by Pamela herself. Fortified by this document she sought her redoubtable aunt.

"Now, Aunt Lydia," said she, "here's the opportunity of your life. You lend me a thousand pounds, and I'll

give you ten per cent. for three years and pay you back at the end of it with a bit over. And if I drop down dead between, you can come on Madame Mirabel."

Lydia was no fool. She was as fond of money as only such a nature can be, and had indeed gathered together quite a substantial hoard in her long years of lucrative employment. She made all the difficulties, of course, which the circumstances demanded, but Pamela, who saw the gleam of greed in her eye, knew that her cause was won from the outset.

She good-humouredly consented to sign the stringent document which Lydia thought necessary for her safety; and to obtain Madame Mirabel's signature to it also. The transaction was concluded without much more delay, and Miss Pamela Pounce passed from the position of underling to that of partner.

The matter was, needless to say, kept private between Madame Mirabel and herself. It is never wholesome for the reputation of a business concern to have these conveniences of management discussed; and, for the mere sake of discipline where large numbers are employed and easy jealousies excited, no change affecting authority can be acknowledged.

Miss Smithson and Miss Popple, therefore, while unable to blind themselves to the fact that their aged employer's infatuation for that scheming Miss Pounce was more lamentably evident than ever, still buoyed themselves up with the hope that her true character would be revealed before the eyes of the too-trusting dame.

Miss Sarah Vibart's wedding order; bride and bridesmaids hats—Jane was chief bridesmaid, an advertisement which, as Pamela herself said, would have been worth paying for ten times over—brought a rush of new *clientèle* to the Bond Street house. Mr. Walsingham's wedding was the event of June—luckily timed before the unexpected death of the Marquis of Harborough—and it is scarcely too much to say that the first thought of every

lady of fashion who received a ticket of invitation was: "Pounce shall make me a new hat!"

Lydia, who kept a close tongue where her nest-egg was concerned, began to unbend considerably towards her niece. Nothing succeeds like success. You could scarce have dragged five shillings out of her, had the girl been lingering on at Tabbishaw's, but, as matters stood, my Lady's Abigail felt "warm in her inwards," every time she thought of that thousand pounds which was so likely to bring a blessing upon her high sense of family feeling.

She took to inviting Pamela to a dish of chocolate in the sewing parlour at Hertford Street of a Saturday afternoon, promising her also a plate of those queen cakes "which my Lady's still-room maid do turn out rather well, and which you're so fond of, my dear."

These invitations Pamela accepted with increasing frequency; and if Lydia happened to be washing her Ladyship's best lace caps or ironing out her ribbons, it was only becoming, from a niece to an aunt, that she should lend a hand, particularly considering the money obligations between them.

But Pamela's real reason for presenting herself at Hertford Street lay so deep down that it could scarcely be said that she acknowledged it even to herself.

She was hankering for news of Jocelyn Bellairs; and at last, by an artful twist of the conversation, Miss Lydia was induced to drop a stray word in connection with him: "that rubbish! Her Ladyship had got a place for him at Bristol, with an India merchant," and she hoped to goodness he'd keep steady, and they'd hear no more of him.

That was the first item of information which Pamela gathered for her starving heart. She tried to tell herself what a relief it was not to have him hanging about, and how splendid that he should have work, and how sure she was that he, so clever, would now make a way for himself, even as she had done. But it was poor comfort!

After two Saturdays wasted, she once more heard the beloved name mentioned: this time again in no uncertain tones of condemnation.

My Lady was so put about. Lydia hadn't known her so upset since the day my Lord was took up as a highwayman; and she the widow Bellairs and he Denis O'Hara.

"That audacious young villain! He's been making a regular popinjay of himself at Bath. There's my Lady Nan Day, recovering from the measles, writes: 'Your nephew, my dear, your nephew is the rage here; driving the most elegant curricle you ever saw with a pair of bloods, which, my Philip says, make his mouth water. Has he come into a fortune or not?' writes my Lady Nan—and she was always a spiteful one—'for he will need it,' says she. 'We was all mortal sorry that his horse, what he set such store by, failed at the Spring races.' My Lady has wrote to him," pursued Lydia, her green eyes maliciously fixed upon her niece, "to explain, for goodness gracious sake, 'for unless he's robbed the mail, Lydia,' says she, 'or been more successful on the highway than my poor Denis'—and that was what put it into my head, Pamela, my love—'I'm very much afraid,' she says, 'tis his master's strong box he's been at, and that will spell prison,' she says, 'and the name so well known.' Oh, the shame of it!"

"Shame indeed!" cried Pamela, her glance flashing back at Lydia's taunt; she knew very well what gave such extra zest to these tales; but she, Pamela, was not one to wear her heart on her sleeve for an old magpie to peck at.

On the following Saturday she saw from the first moment she crossed the threshold that Lydia was big with news, unpleasant enough to make her bursting to tell it.

Pamela was past mistress of exasperating tactics herself, and there was some very pretty fencing between the two, by which Lydia was forced to restrain her

old-maidish desire to plant a dagger in the bosom of the younger maid. Pamela had so much to discourse about on the new Turban mode, and the last letter from Madame Eglantine to Madame Mirabel.

" Poor thing, she's in all the states, what with these new dreadful doings and the insolence of the people, and Ildefonse letting his hair grow and going out to clubs o' night to talk blasphemy. Ugh ! " said Pamela, " I never could abide that man." And my Lady Amelia Vibart, haggling over the wedding bills, 'twas a scandal ! And had Aunt Lydia heard the last horrid tit-bit about my Lord Harborough and Miss Falcon ? And wouldn't it be a pity if Mr. Walsingham were to miss coming in for the title after all ? 'Twas said my Lord Harborough was mad set on marrying her, when there wouldn't be a mité of reason why she shouldn't have a brat to put Mr. W.'s nose out of joint !

Lydia was still seeking for an interval in which to thrust, when My Lady's bell rang with the double pull which indicated that Miss Pounce had better hurry herself, or my Lady would know the reason why.

Pamela smiled to herself as the door was banged behind her Aunt ; then she sighed.

Aunt Lydia was a tabby if ever there was one, but oh, dear, what dreadful bit of tattle was she bound to hear before the evening was out ? And oh, dear, what a pity it was that things went so contrary in this world, and that poor girls had hearts at all !

She had hardly had time pensively to nibble through a queen cake—for Pamela was much too sensible to let any sentimentality interfere with her appetite—when Lydia reappeared, and, with much flouncing and head tossing, informed her that, it being a dratted nuisance that people wouldn't mind their own business, it had come to her Ladyship's ears, through Pompey, that Pamela was present in the house. Nothing would serve her Ladyship but that she must come up at once about a " head " for to-night's concert.

Pamela shook the crumbs from her apron and rose with the imperturbable alacrity which it was her pride to bring to all affairs of business.

The day was hot, and my Lady's big bed-chamber a delicious cave of coolness after the highly-elevated atmosphere of Lydia's own parlour. The amber curtains were drawn before the big windows; there was a shining sea of parquet floor on which delicate French furniture made here and there an attractive island. An immense bunch of roses on the spindle-legged dressing-table just caught the breeze from the wide-open window, and wafted fragrance. My Lady herself, extended in a vapour of white muslin on an amber satin couch, lazily fanning herself, was as agreeable a spectacle as any heated young woman with refined tastes could hope to gaze upon.

"Sit down, Miss Pounce," said Kitty affably. "(Lydia, get out the bandbox with the saffron head.) Now, my dear, good, kind creature, look at it. Yes! I know. 'Tis the sweetest thing I've laid eyes on this season, but conceive my horror, Miss Pounce, when I heard anon that Her Majesty was to be present at the Duchess of Portland's to-night. Conceive my horror! I saw myself with the Queen's eyes! I tell you, Miss Pounce, my days at Court would have been counted."

Here Lydia was heard to murmur, with the familiarity of long service, and a backward scratch at her niece that she was tired telling her Ladyship that the last year's head from Madame Eglantine, which her Ladyship had never worn but the once, would be the very thing for her to wear to-night, "and a genteel, tasty, Frenchy confection it was," which her Ladyship wouldn't better not if she ransacked Bond Street.

"I tell you, you perverse piece," cried her mistress, fanning herself with an energy calculated to make even the spectator feel hot, "that turn myself into a frump with a last year's mode, I'll not do, even to please the Queen. Pamela, child, I've set my heart on the saffron head. I vow and protest those gold ospreys

with the cluster of saffron roses and the little wreath of green leaves between, I vow and protest 'tis the very dream to go with my India gold-embroidered gown. 'Tis there on the bed, my dear, as fine as a cobweb! There'll not be another like it in the room. And there's never anything so elegant as white and gold of a hot night. With my dark eyes, Pamela, and the gold ospreys—oh, but the gold ospreys, so airy, so fly-away! And Her Majesty who will not even tolerate feathers! I'd have worn my high band of diamonds—pshaw! it grieves me to the very soul! What can you suggest?"

Pamela put her finger to her lip and corrugated her white brow in the profoundest thought. Kitty held her breath as she watched her. The fate of nations might have been hanging between them. Then said the milliner decisively, "I see nothing for it. We can't do it, my Lady. The ospreys will have to go." Then, as Kitty's face fell, she added briskly, "But there! I often say to myself, what seems a trial is a blessing. Why should not your Ladyship set a fashion? It came to me just as I looked at your Ladyship's gown and the fairy elegance of that India embroidery, and your Ladyship wears a wreath so becoming; wouldn't gold grapes and green leaves look tasty, bunches each side with the di'mond bandeau to draw them together?"

"Pounce, you're a genius!" Kitty dropped her fan to clap her hands.

At the same moment my Lord came into the room and smiled to see her look so pleased.

"Faith, and I've come at the right tick of the clock, I think—morning to you, Miss Pounce. You and my Lady and your fripperies, 'tis the business of the world, ain't it?" He rubbed his hands and hemmed. "By your bright face, I've come at the right tick, Kitty, me darling, to ask you for a proof of your good nature."

"A proof of my good nature, my Lord? So long as 'tis nothing to go against my good sense."

Kitty was always ready to oblige, in reason, but she had her wits about her.

" Stay, child," she cried, as Pamela prepared discreetly to withdraw. " It can but take a moment. We must send Pompey for the grapes, to Bond Street, and I vow that no hand but yours shall fasten them in my curls. Your niece will write a note, Lydia, at my escritoire, and see that the black brat runs. They might send a choice of sizes, what think you, Pamela ? *Oh, what is it,* my Lord ? You men are so impatient."

" Why, Kitty," said her husband, coming close to the sofa, on which his lively little spouse now sat very straight, gesticulating among the mother-of-pearl shimmer of her cushions. " The matter concerns you, really, more than meself. At least, it concerns your family. Poor young Bellairs has been arrested for debt. Nipped from me very side, my dear, as we came out of the Cocoa Tree together, a while ago, by a rascally pimp ! "

" Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs ? Do you refer to Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs ? " asked my Lady Kilcroney, becoming rigid.

Pamela's quill, scratching wildly across a great sheet of paper, was arrested in mid flourish.

There was a small unpleasant pause, broken by a loud sniff from Lydia.

Then my Lady said : " Indeed. I understood the young gentleman was at Bristol."

My Lord was not misled by the quietness of her tone. " Ah, God help you, Kitty," he exclaimed, flustered. " Sure you never believed you could keep a lad of that kidney with his nose in a desk ? Didn't he off with himself with his first three months' salary, and hasn't his luck been the talk of Bath, barring the let-down of a sorrel filly at the point-to-point ? And sure, if it hadn't been that the dice has been going against him the last three or four days——" he broke off.

Kitty sat like an image of scorn ; and my Lord, seeing that his mission did not seem likely to be blessed with success, proceeded in nettled tones :

" The long and the short of it is, I've promised Jocelyn we'd see to it. 'Tis only a matter of ninety-seven pound ten, when all is said and done. And that to a livery stableman."

He drew a crumpled sheet of blue paper from his pocket as he spoke. Kitty unexpectedly stretched out her hand; with a sigh of relief he put it into it.

" I knew you'd be the first to say it ought to be paid, my dearest life."

" Certainly, it ought to be paid, Denis."

" You wouldn't wish the poor dear lad—and him as pleasant over the green cloth as ever I met—to be penned up in the sponging house. Besides which," added Kilcroney, in imprudent reminiscence, " don't I know, isn't it the mischief once you get into one of those holes! 'Tis like a sheep in a ditch: the sky is black with crows after you in a twinkling."

" Very sad," said my Lady.

She tendered the blue paper back with an indifferent gesture.

" Have you despatched Pompey, Lydia? "

Lord Kilcroney put his hands behind him.

" Nay! nay! " cried he, with the uneasy boisterousness of one who would force the issue as a joke. " 'Tis your business, me darling."

" I thought you wanted it paid, my Lord? "

" And maybe," cried he, laughing yet more violently, " you think I can pay it? "

He began pulling his pockets out.

" Sure that would be the joke entirely! I'm cleaned through. There ain't a single chinker left in my purse, Kitty, and it's the lovely red silk one you made me yourself last Christmas. Troth! I am this moment what they say Nature abhors——"

" And what's that, Sir? "

" A vacuum, my love," quoth my Lord, with a great guffaw.

Kitty contemplated him a moment, icily. Then she said: "All my sympathies are with Nature."

Kilcroney reddened, shrugged his shoulders, and replacing the linings of his pockets in their normal position, thrust his hands into them, and sauntered out of the room.

There was nothing further to be done; the moment was unpropitious.

Kitty balled the blue sheet with an angry hand, and flung it after him, and Pamela, who had never finished that phrase of directions, rose from the *escritoire* and picked it up.

The action was performed with so much composure that it seemed but the natural outcome of her good manners.

"Don't give it back to me, child!" exclaimed Kitty with tartness. "Throw it into the waste paper basket. Have you wrote your message?"

Pamela walked back to the writing table.

"I was un-bethinking myself, your Ladyship, that it would be better for me to run back myself, and choose the sprays. Miss Smithson, the person in charge of the office of a Saturday, is that disagreeable, she'd send the wrong sets on purpose. It won't take me half an hour, my Lady."

She tore the sheet she had begun writing upon in two, and dropped it into the elegant little gilt be-ribboned basket, which was the repository of my Lady Kilcroney's scraps. She made a brisk curtsy and stepped out of the room.

Even Lydia's sharp eyes failed to perceive that she had not thrown away the livery-man's crumpled account; that she had thrust into her kerchief.

Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs was not destined to spend the Sabbath in a sponging house, for he was released on Saturday night, some one having settled Mr. Thomas Jobbin's livery-stable account, before any other of his creditors had had wind of his arrest.

Now the young gentleman had stepped into liberty in a very bad humour. He had no doubt but that he was once again indebted to my Lady Kilcroney in the matter, but, like many another spendthrift, not having the smallest claim upon her generosity he considered that it ought to be unlimited in his regard, and felt himself injured that it should go no further. He had come to view himself as having a right to a share of old Bellairs's money. Wasn't he, split him, the last of the name? Now, was this a way to treat the only living representative of a Nabob who had left his widow the command of millions? Just the debt writ off, and not a farthing over to jingle in your pocket, or a question what was to become of a fellow! "Never you turn a hair," had said my Lord. "I'll be back again in a jiffy to set you free, and we'll have a jolly night of it while my Lady's at her catterwaul."

He had expected no less of one who, like Denis Kilcroney, was profiting not only of his own uncle's hoard, but of that old gentleman's tactful demise.

But instead of the promised re-appearance a message had been flung in at him, left by a lackey towards seven of the clock; my Lord was mortal sorry, and he sent a bottle of gin and some lemons.

And at ten the prisoner had been told he was free.

Mr. Bellairs had hot blood, and it was all afire. And the mischief was in it that he might not even have the satisfaction of calling out the dashed Irishman for his insolence, since he couldn't help being under an obligation.

He avoided the Cocoa-Tree that evening and plunged into lower haunts, where, not in the very best company, play ran very nearly as high as at the Mayfair clubs.

He was an audacious, reckless player, but in the main a successful one. To-night there was something almost fantastic in his luck. He went home in the blue of the morning with his pockets full of gold; his resentful mood was rather augmented by his good fortune than otherwise.

Nor was he in a whit better temper when some five hours later he swaggered out into the Green Park, shaven to velvet, his sparrow-tail coat, his high close-fitting boots, his tight buckskin breeches and their bunches of ribbon, his short waistcoat, and his big buckled hat, the very last thing in manly modes. It was his intention to call upon my Lady Kilcroney in Hertford Street and repay her the paltry ninety-seven pounds ten which stood between him and a meeting with my Lord.

Miss Pamela Pounce, coming from church and stepping in the same direction—she had grown singularly attentive to Aunt Lydia—came plump upon the Beau as their paths converged at the Piccadilly gate. His dark face kindled while her blooming cheek grew pale.

"La, to be sure, sir, who'd ha' thought of meeting you?"

"Why, and is it you, Pamela?"

His eye ran her up and down. She was clad in shimmering blue-lilac taffety, and her wide-brimmed hat, of the kind which Sir Joshua had set the rage, was trimmed with broad silk ribbons of the same shade. She wore a plain muslin kerchief; a black ribbon tied back her unpowdered chestnut curls. She made a very pleasant picture; all, with perfect taste, within a certain modest compass becoming her station.

There was no mistaking the emotion evoked in her by the sight of him. Her breath came quickly; her clear gaze fluttered and fell, and her pallor was succeeded by a flame of carnation.

Now out of the black mood in Mr. Bellairs's soul there flashed an evil fire.

"Of all the meetings in the whole world," cried he, ardently, "there's none could give me half so much joy, my dearest creature. Turn with me. I must speak with you. Nay, Pamela, I vow, I vow, you've not been out of my thoughts this month. Turn and come with me, I say. Let us away under the trees, where we can talk by ourselves. Pamela, dearest Pamela, take my arm. You

are more lovely than ever, and I am—I am more headlong in love than ever I was before!"

There was too great a flutter in the girl's soul for her to have her usual cool grip of the situation. An overwhelming tide of happiness lifted her from her mental balance. She could not doubt that, after all these months, it must be a genuine love that lit up his glance, that trembled in his voice and in his. touch She had proved to him, surely, what kind of girl she was. He must mean the right thing at last, or he would not so whole-heartedly declare himself.

And she had just rendered him a signal service, which (though he could not yet know it), gave her a delightful sense of meeting him on his own level. She was, moreover, in a vastly different position now from that of the mere working milliner. She had resources at her command; a future before her.

And there he was, the dear fellow, and he loved her still! Could a Sunday morning in June hold a more golden bliss?

So she hung on his arm, and listened with parted lips to his raptures, to the fantastic string of plans, the sweet, repeated endearments which poured from his lips. Now that they had met there were to be no more partings. Things were changed. He had plenty of money. Here she looked at him in astonishment, and he drew a handful of gold from his pocket. He was in the Devil's own vein of luck, he told her. He wouldn't listen to her objurgation; he laughed at the admonishing finger. Her assurance that she possessed a safer and more worthy source of wealth he tossed aside as a jest. There was a horse of his booked for Ascot. If she did not romp in with a sweet little cottage at Fulham for them both at her heels! . . .

"Oh, Mr. Bellairs!" Pamela clasped her other hand over his arm. "I could come up and down to business as easy as easy. A cottage with a bit of garden! 'Tis the very thing I've always dreamed of!"

"And I hope you put me in the dream, my lovely girl." He kissed her behind the trunk of a big beech-tree. "Why," cried he, "who'd have thought to find you so sensible all at once?"

It was not, perhaps, so much the words, as the way in which he looked at her after he had kissed her, that opened the sudden gulf before her! She drew back, and stood staring; her face haggard; all the lovely bloom and youthful ecstasy blasted out of it.

Then she said, in a low, strained voice—Pamela went straight to her point, she was not one to cover ugly situations with a mince of words—"You don't mean marriage, then, Mr. Bellairs?"

The ugliness of his mood sprang into naked prominence. He broke into a loud laugh.

"Come, don't play the prude, now! Don't pretend you didn't understand." Then he added, a sort of shame creeping into his accents in spite of himself, "Be sensible, my dear girl. Don't play the fool with our lives again."

He put out his arm again to embrace her, but she struck him a vigorous buffet that sent him staggering from her.

"You've laid a vile trap for me, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, but thank God I didn't fall into it! I see you now as you are, a low, selfish scamp that doesn't think it shame to take his pleasure on other people. You'd drag my good name into the dust with as little concern as you live on my Lady's money. So long as you get your fling you don't care who you rob or what you destroy! Oh, I'm glad to have seen you as you are! And good morning to you, Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, for a very paltry dog!"

She swept him a curtsy which was magnificent in its repudiation. He had a swift vision of her scorching eyes, her scarlet cheeks; she turned and left him, dumbfounded.

"I'm done with love," said Pamela Pounce, to

herself. " May I never hear of it, or see it, or touch it again ! "

Little did she guess with what overwhelming passion she was very shortly destined to behold the cruel god at work upon another life !

CHAPTER X

In Which Miss Pamela Pounce Sets Three Black Feathers for Tragedy

Miss Pamela Pounce was in the act of tying on her own hat, in the upper room, preparatory to departure after the day's work, when a breathless junior summoned her.

"There's a young lady below as wants to see you, Miss Pounce, and, la! I think 'tis Miss Falcon!"

Now, Felicity Falcon had recently flashed out upon the London stage with a startling and unexpected splendour that was more like that of a comet than of a star; Miss Farren, Mrs. Siddons, Mrs. Jordan, were for the moment as idols overthrown. The cry was all for Falcon. Her name was on every man's lips. She was the first excitement of the season; and not the opera, not an oratorio, not a concert, not a rout at Almack's, nor a display at Ranelagh, could be said to offer attraction in comparison to the playhouse which announced the fair Falcon in the night's performance.

On hearing this remarkable name, Pamela paused, her hand on the black velvet string which fastened her simple Dunstable straw under her round, white chin. A play-actress! Many a young person of that profession had Miss Pounce with dignity shown forth already from the doors of this select establishment: "Much regretting, Madame, that there is nothing likely to suit you here."

Heavens, if a Mirabel hat were to be recognised on the boards! But Felicity Falcon? It was only last week that Pamela had wept and trembled, and sucked in

breaths of excitement over her "Mrs. Haller." Never had she beheld anything more affecting, more impassioned, soul-stirring, and elegant than that impersonation.

To provide Miss Falcon with a hat in which she would enthral and ravish all London! It was too splendid an opportunity for such an artistic soul as that of Pamela to resist. After hours, too, and the shutters putting up, and no fear of awkward rencounters. And if some of her ladies did find it out, why, foh! for one that would be offended, forty would order a hat to the same model.

Pamela flung the Dunstable straw off her chestnut head, and turning with great dignity, "Inform Miss Falcon," said she, "that I will attend her presently."

After a due delay, which she spent in drumming with white fingers on the dressing-table, her eyes lost beyond her own reflection, in a far vision of millinery genius, Madame Mirabel's partner appeared in the empty shop; sedate, her eyebrows well elevated into her white forehead, her hands folded on her trim waistband.

The slender figure in the brown silk cloak turned quickly with a rustle and flutter.

"You was wishful to speak with me, Madam?" questioned Miss Pounce, in her finest business manner.

"I want a hat for to-night, for Lady Teazle—for the third act, for the screen scene. Oh, I want something——"

Miss Pounce raised her hand.

"One moment, Madam."

She gazed at the narrow, pale face, unrouged; the dark, ardent eyes.

"'Tis the most mortal-genteel creature I have ever seen," thought Pamela.

"Not a word, Miss Falcon!" cried she. Then in the tone of a sibyl: "Black and white; or yet all white. But if you listen to me, black *and* white."

"I've no time to get any new gowns for the part," said Miss Falcon.

She had a slow, musical voice, with a ring in it as of tears never far off, yet never to be shed.

"And if you'll excuse me, Miss," repeated the milliner, "Lady Teazle's not your part, so to speak. Tragedy, that's what you're born to. Oh, your Mrs. Haller!" Pamela drew a sucking breath in reminiscence of last week's thrills. "There! I'd never ask to enjoy anything more. Cry, I did. I couldn't see out of my two eyes, I vow and protest, when I came forth out of the theatre. But if it's got to be Lady Teazle, Madame, 'tis your one bit of tragedy I'm to dress your head for, as I understand it. And put colour on it—I declare I'd as soon stick a pink rosette on that there goddess with the lamp from Greece his Grace of Hampshire sets so much store by in his hall. Put yourself into white for it, Miss Falcon, and I'll do you a hat that'll show it off and you. When all's said and done, 'twill be a symbol of what an innocent, poor young lady you are, so took in by that lying young gentleman, what I'd hiss off the boards every time he shows his vile, deceitful face, if I'd my will! La! men are base creatures," cried Pamela out of her own bitterness. "White for your innocence, and the shadow of my broad brim over your eyes with a toss of white feathers atop, and just three black plumes standing up in the midst of them; the bit of tragedy that has come into your young life; one," said Miss Pounce, "for the horrid danger you've escaped, and one for your poor deceived heart, and one for the remorse, like, over the goodness of that kind Sir Peter, making his will so generous and trusting, for all his ways 'ud be enough to drive any wife out of her wits. Those black feathers," said the girl impressively, "will show you off, Miss Falcon, better than trumpet blasts."

Miss Falcon listened with an odd, abstracted look.

"So you think I'm best in tragedy, do you?" she said, and sighed. "But I don't want to be tragic, I want to be happy." And then: "I'm late!" she cried impetuously. "You'll have to bring me the hat

to the theatre. I've scarce the time to get into my clothes."

A handsome private coach, with liveried footmen, was waiting for her at the door, and as Pamela accompanied her to the threshold, the actress looked back over her shoulder with a fugitive smile :

" I'll wear a white satin gown for the screen scene," she said, stepped into the coach, and was whirled away.

Pamela stood looking after her.

" Now who's paying for all that ? " the milliner asked herself. " Some very great personage, 'tis well known; for anything more splendid and discreet I never see. Best in tragedy, you poor thing ! " The tears rose to Pamela's candid eyes. " Why, 'tis tragedy itself you are already ! You so young, with that smile that ought to have warmed a good man's heart ! La, if my ladies knew who 'tis I'm going to trim a hat for this minute, and where 'tis I'm to bring it when 'tis done ! "

Pamela Pounce looked about her with shrewd eyes, as she sat, very politely, on the edge of a cane chair in Miss Falcon's dressing-room at Drury Lane. A bandbox at her feet, her hands folded one across the other in her dove-grey lap, she presented th very image of elegant propriety in a doubtful atmosphere. She had not expected to find company in the dressing-room, the play being well started ; nevertheless, there was a knot of two or three modish-looking individuals who laughed a good deal together, and tapped the lids of their own snuff-boxes and took pinches out of each other's with positively the last thing in flourishes.

The gaunt woman who moved about at the back of the dressing-table, unnecessarily shaking garments, was, of course, the actress's dresser, and a sour piece she was, thought Pamela, who had already refused, with a high air of contempt, this functionary's proposal to leave the bandbox with her. " As if I was come all this way to do

porter's work!" thought Miss Pounce, with a toss of her admirably tired head.

Miss Falcon was standing at the door, looking in upon them, before anyone was aware of her presence; then she came forward, followed by a portly, handsome gentleman past middle age, at sight of whom the gossips bowed to a most obsequious depth.

Miss Falcon bore still upon her countenance the humorous peevishness of the character she had just represented.

"Why, how now?" she exclaimed. "Fie, for shame, gentlemen! What are you doing here? If you desire to show me a compliment your place is before the curtain, sirs! Foh! 'Tis a poor compliment to salute an actress in her dressing-room!"

"Why, my dearest creature!" exclaimed the chief of the fops, coming forward, and bowing repeatedly with such an affected parade of courtesy that Pamela's hand itched to box his ears. "I vow and declare we are but mustering all our energies to acclaim you after your great scene! We would not spoil that effect, 'pon our life! Not for a hundred thousand guineas! What's Lady Teazle before the screen scene? No part for your genius, incomparable Falcon!"

"Out with you now, then!" said Miss Falcon. "Good evening, Miss Pounce. Oh, gentlemen, gentlemen, indeed you cannot remain here! Miss Pounce and I have the most important business on hand. La, that bandbox! It is vastly good of you, Miss Pounce. Pray, my Lord, give the gentlemen the lead and take them to their seats!"

"Rat me!" said the spokesman of the fashionable group, looking round with what Pamela thought was a very offensive leer. "If my Lord Harborough sets the example, who are we that we should refuse to follow it? After you, my Lord Marquis."

Pamela had often heard the name of the great Marquis, especially of late, but she had never yet seen him. She now gazed at him with shrewd eyes of disapproval.

" Ah, my Lord, you may have a fine taste in coaches and in the horses to draw them, and a superlative delicate taste in play-actresses, but to my mind 'tis mortal poor taste to be bringing those grey hairs that are under your wig, and an honoured name, and all your privilege to the undoing of one poor girl! You should keep that smile for your grand-nephews—Mr. W.'s brats—you should indeed, my Lord!"

My Lord Harborough raised himself from a profound bow over the hand which Felicity Falcon extended to him in a careless sort of way, more as if she were dropping something out of it than yielding it to his caress. The smile he gave her as he straightened himself was full of ardent admiration. Although he failed to meet with her favour, Pamela could not but admit that he had a very splendid presence, and that any woman's head, much less that of a young player on her promotion, might well be turned by receiving attention from such a quarter.

My Lord Marquis now waved the company from the room with a politely compelling gesture, as of a host who bids his guests pass before him; kissed his hand to Miss Falcon, and himself departed.

" Now, my dear girl, my dear girl, the hat!" cried she, turning upon Pamela.

And Pamela had the strange thought that Miss Falcon —even though she had stepped off the boards—had not ceased acting for one single moment, and that no emotion had been more cleverly counterfeited than the playfulness with which she was now herself addressed.

Indeed, when Felicity Falcon first contemplated her countenance in the mirror under that confection in which Miss Pounce considered her own genius had reached its most perfect expression, so deep an air of tragedy spread itself over her features that the sprightly milliner thought in dismay, " Heaven be good to me; to see her one would think my lovely feathers were crowning a hearse!"

But as if she guessed her companion's thoughts, the play-actress instantly resumed a jocund air, and, twisting

her head from side to side, treated her own reflection to smiles of different meanings, as though testing their effect; mischief, archness, innocent mirth, mockery, melancholy, chased each other across her fair countenance like shadows over a pool, and in each Miss Pounce could have cried out to her to stay it, vowing that she was more perfect in it than the last.

Indeed, the delicate loveliness set in the flying powdered curls, crowned with the soft splendour of the feathers, marked, so to speak, by the three notes of black, was a vision worth gazing upon. The sheen of the white satin she had chosen for her robe flung up the ivory of her shoulders and throat. Miss Pounce almost regretted to see the obligatory smear of rouge put on each pale cheek; by which, however, the lily fairness gained something exotic, feverish, that seemed to match very well with the swift passion of her art.

"It'll be such a Lady Teazle as never was," thought the milliner; and was wondering whether she could yet find a seat for herself in the theatre, when, turning suddenly dark, haunted eyes upon her, Miss Falcon said like a child:

"Oh, do let me find you here when I come back, you kind thing!" and, without giving Madame Mirabel's head woman time to reply, she added: "I know you will," and whisked back to the dressing-table.

Her hand hovered over a closed jewel-case, then, shrugging her shoulders, she drew out a string of pearls and clasped it round her throat.

* * * * *

It was strange for Pamela presently to sit alone in the little dressing-room and think of the mimic play of emotion, clash of passion and interest that was enthralling so many scores of spectators within a few yards of her; to think, too, of that drama of real life, so sad and shameful, of which she had unexpectedly become a witness.

It was contrary to her vivacious nature to sit, unoccupied and in patience, while the world swept on its way, but to-night she had much to engross her thoughts. All she had seen pointed to courses which, to her straight judgment, could not but appear as evil. Yet if ever, thought Pamela Pounce, there was delicacy and purity stamped on a human countenance, if ever noble pride, it was on the face of the young play-actress.

"Why did she ask me to remain?" puzzled the girl. "If my Lord Harborough is her protector, as he seems to be, what does she want with a poor, honest milliner? Oh, la! to see her, so beautiful, with them pearls, and to know what it means, I could fair cry!"

Miss Falcon's dresser came rushing in, declaring that there never had been such a success as the new Lady Teazle; that the house had had her out again and again. "And, oh, my goodness, the shouts and claps and nosegays flying! What a pity Miss had not been in the gallery!"

Before Pamela had time to reply Miss Falcon herself, accompanied by a very conspicuous group of admirers, returned to her dressing-room. Her flush outdid the rouge, her eyes flashed. The tips of her taper fingers rested on Lord Harborough's wrist, and he came in leading her with an air as though her triumph belonged to him. Behind her the sycophants gabbled, "for all the world like father's geese," thought Miss Pounce.

"Oh, my Lord, she is incomparable!" "I do assure you, Miss Falcon, when the screen was knocked down and you stood forth I could have fallen on my knees before you!" "'Pon honour! 'Pon honour, never was acting half so fine!"

The flush was fading, and the fire dying in her gaze as she turned round upon them.

"Pray, gentlemen, you are very kind, but I have to change my gown for the next act. My Lord, bid your friends leave me. And you too, my Lord."

As bowing, kissing hands, grimacing, jostling against

each other, the little knot of gossips withdrew, obedient once more to their patron's wave, he himself lingered.

" Felicity," he said, " there never was anyone like you. My dear, you brought the tears to my eyes."

When he released her hand there was a new ring upon it. The donor hurried forth, as if, with the finest tact, to forego gratitude in connection with a trifle, or so Miss Pounce understood his magnificent mien.

Felicity gazed at the object on her hand, gave a laugh which rang scornful, dropped the jewel from her on the dressing-table, and sat down before the mirror.

" Now," said she to Pamela, " take off the hat yourself, if you will. My dresser hath so gross a touch. The hat, you know, it has made me to-night. I owe you a vast debt of gratitude. Oh, those black feathers! Your excellent taste, child, gave the note, I do assure you, to my whole rendering. The tragedy, you know, and the innocence, and the remorse."

It seemed to Pamela as if she were mocking herself as she gazed upon her own countenance. She broke off. There was a knock at the door.

" Come in," she cried. And, as a young gentleman in mourning, with a pale face, appeared in the aperture, she went on in an unchanged voice : " How would it be, Miss Pounce, if I were to run a blue ribbon among these curls ? 'Twould not come amiss, I think, in the last act, to mark the girlishness of Lady Teazle beside so old a husband. Now, my Lord, pray be quick about your business. I have scarce five minutes to give you ! Yes, a blue ribbon, I think. You have such charming fingers, my dear, pray pass it in yourself. Go on, my Lord, I can see you very well in the glass, and sure, besides, I did not promise to look at you, so long as I listen."

" You mean to torture me," said the young man in a low voice.

Had he been on the rack, Pamela thought, glancing compassionately at his reflection, as her hands moved

delicately in the actress's tresses, he could scarce have had a greater air of suffering.

" Pho ! " cried Miss Falcon. (" Is not that a trifle too forward, Miss Pounce ? ") " Pray, my Lord, remember, this interview is none of my seeking."

" I asked to speak with you alone."

" Ah, but I did not promise you that ! Say out, or keep silence, it matters nothing to me."

" I begin to believe what I have heard," he exclaimed hoarsely.

Her eye flashed lightning at his image in the glass.

" Indeed, my Lord ? And that again leaves me indifferent."

But as she spoke she turned round on her chair. What a marvel of loveliness she was, thought the milliner. 'Twas but natural any poor young gentleman that loved her should be distraught upon her. He gazed on her wildly, then broke out, clasping his hands :

" Nay," he cried. " I will not believe it. I will not believe it, unless you tell me yourself. Felicity, my father is dead. I am my own master. Look at me. Behold this black. I came straight—yes, I am not ashamed of it—straight from the closing of my father's grave to offer you my hand and name."

He paused.

" I ought, no doubt, to be overwhelmed at your generosity. A month ago you were no less ardent, if I remember right, in pressing a different proposition," she said very quietly.

Pamela's heart quickened in passionate sympathy. What a world was this for poor girls !

" It's not possible," the young gentleman cried, " that you will carry rancour so far ! A month ago I was not a free agent ; a month ago I—oh, confusion ! You cannot have understood. I—Miss Falcon, I am now Earl Ashmore, and I ask you to become my countess. This is a question of marriage. You cannot thus lightly dismiss so honourable, so respectful an offer ! "

" Marriage ! " she laughed. " I, too, am a free agent, sir, and I have tasted liberty longer than you. I have no desire to relinquish it."

A moment he stood gazing at her with clenched hands and open mouth, as if unable to grasp the extent of her folly and his own misery. Then he snapped his jaws together and crimsoned to the roots of his lightly powdered hair.

" It's true, then ? "

" What is true ? "

" What all the world says ; that you're my Lord Harborough's—my Lord Harborough's——"

He choked upon the word.

Pamela Pounce held her breath in the dreadful silence that ensued. Then :

" Don't be a foolish lad," said Miss Falcon in a changed kind voice. " One day you'll say, ' Whatever the player woman may have done, she did one good deed to me. She wouldn't marry me when I was fool enough to ask her.' "

Then Felicity turned back to the mirror with a laugh that rang like tinkling icicles, so musical it was, so cold.

The wretched young man cast himself on his knees, lifted his clasped hands and wrung them. He had forgotten that there was any witness, save the one who was, at that moment, all the world to him.

" Felicity, I don't care what you have done—what you are to that bad old man. I will forgive everything. Come to me and be my wife ! "

" Now, Bonnets, open the door. Miss Pounce, pray put a hand upon my Lord's elbow and help him to rise. That is the way out, my Lord Ambrose. (I cannot help it. I remember best the name under which you once insulted me.) *You* forgive me ? Had I the time I could laugh. Heavens ! But three minutes to get into the paduasoy ! "

She did laugh as the young nobleman, a look on his face which struck a kind of terror into Pamela's womanly

heart, flung his hands out with a menace and dashed from the room,

"Thank Heaven, the creature's gone! Bolt the door, Mrs. Bonnets. I'll have no more visitors till the play's over!"

Pamela Pounce was not bidden remain this time; but she could not bring herself to leave the dressing-room until Miss Falcon's last appearance there. Talk of plays! What a tremendous play she had seen that night. 'Twould be like walking out before the last curtain dropped to go home now.

When the actress returned she was accompanied only by Lord Harborough. As he led her in he looked at her hand.

"I see," he said, "you have not honoured my poor gift."

"My Lord," she said, "I have honoured you sixty-five times with these pearls. Is it not enough? As for rings, there is a slave weight about them. I hate them. But is this really mine? Mine to do as I will with?"

He smiled at each question, and Pamela thought that, for all his fond admiration, there was a sort of contemptuous indulgence lurking in his glance—that he had the air of one who says to himself, "These pretty tricks are known; these charming moods are part of the little game. I have not the enthusiasm of youth, but I have experience, I have toleration, and I have patience!"

"It is an elegant and artistic ring," said Miss Falcon, lifting it to the light of the wax candles which branched from her mirror. "A sapphire, I see, and all chased."

"It was found," said Lord Harborough, "in a Roman tomb. There is not another like it in the world!"

"And what does it represent? Oh, I see snakes about that strange little face!"

"'Tis a Medusa head."

"What?" she cried. "What an ill omen for an actress! How terrible if I were to turn my audience to stone. Fie, I would not keep such a thing about me for the world! Pray, Miss Pounce, will you accept this

trifle in memory of our first acquaintance and of, oh, your beautiful hat! How kind of you, dear girl, to stay and see the last of me. Why, it just fits your finger! Nay, I will take no refusal. My cloak, Bonnets! La, I am mortal tired. Pray, my Lord, good night. Well, as far as the coach then, but no further. Remember our compact!"

"As far as the coach," said the peer, with his disillusioned smile. "As far as the coach at least, lovely mystery, beautiful secret! Oh, the Medusa head would have been vastly appropriate, I assure you!"

They went forth, and Pamela Pounce stared at her ring. She had never felt, in all her varied energetic existence, thus puzzled and troubled.

"Heaven ha' mercy," she thought, "what a prodigious bit of insolence, to give it to me under his very nose! And, oh, lud, what's a body to think? Will he marry her after all and my poor Miss Sarah and Mr. W. be cut out? She wears his pearls and drives in his coach, and yet withal he's to lead her no further than its door!"

* * * * *

"'Tis the most dreadful tale, child, that's current," said my Lady Kilcroney to her friend, Nan Day, as they met in Madame Mirabel's hat shop. "They say my young Lord Ashmore has put an end to himself. I met the Duke of Hampshire anon, and His Grace could scarce speak, so overwhelmed was he. Lord Ashmore's father was his friend and neighbour."

Pamela Pounce put down the dove-coloured capote she had been about to place upon Lady Anne Day's pretty head. She was more affected than her customer, who looked up, knitting her brows vaguely, with small interest in her blue eyes.

"Ashmore?"

"Why, Nan, he that was young Ambrose! A pretty youth, and full of promise. It seems he was mad in love with Falcon, the actress. Did you see her Lady Teazle

last night? 'Twas a wonder, my love, but a thought too solemn. But, oh, Pounce, child, she had a hat! You should have seen it! With all your art, you've never dreamt one like it. Eglantine, Eglantine at her best. Paris was stamped all over it. When all is said and done there is naught like the French taste."

"I have always said so, my Lady," responded Miss Pounce, "and there's a case upstairs full of the real Paris modes, of which I'd like your Ladyship to have her pick this moment! Perhaps the last consignment we'll get for goodness knows how long, seeing the trouble over there. Fetched at the Dover coach office by our special messenger not half an hour ago, I do assure your Ladyship."

Pamela could control her voice better than her hands, and the proffessional patter escaped her almost mechanically.

"But I haven't seen how the capote suits me," protested Nan Day, a little pettishly. "Kitty, what say you? I've been so long in the fields. I was scarce fit to go out in a chair at Bath, so worn was I with the sick-nursing," complained the squire's wife, "I have positively forgot what a fashion looks like. Sister Susan promised to meet me here and advise—not indeed that I care for my Lady Verney's taste. You are ten thousand times better, my dearest Kitty. Pray give me your opinion."

"My love," said Kitty, "in all sober earnest I am too overset to be able to give my mind to it as I ought. That unfortunate young man! It seems Lord Harborough cast him out of her dressing-room last night, and there was a monstrous great scandal at the theatre door. The wretched girl, my Lord Harborough——"

"And what, my Lady, have you heard of it already?" said a masculine voice behind her. And all started to behold Lord Verney in their midst. "I thought I was the first to have wind of it, coming straight from Brooks's. 'Tis scarce an hour since he was picked up unconscious."

"Never say," cried my Lady Kilcroney in horror,

" that he had so little discretion as to choose a club for such an act."

Lord Verney stared.

" Why, Madame, you speak as if the poor Marquis had had any choice in the matter ? "

" The poor Marquis ? In Heaven's name, collect your wits. 'Tis not Lord Harborough who has committed suicide ? "

" Indeed, my Lady Kilcroney, the idea is sprung entirely from your own imagination. Lord Harborough's illness is a fit. He had scarce interchanged a few words with a friend in the club room when he groaned and fell forward. Sir Richard Jebb and Dr. Jenner were at once summoned. They could not get the blood to flow. He was still breathing, that was all."

" Well, 'tis another old sinner gone to his account," said Nan Day philosophically. " And Sarah W. is a Marchioness—who'd have thought it ? Where is Susan ? I'm not sure, Miss Pounce, that I really care for a capote. Could you not let me see some of those French hats you spoke of anon ? "

" Ah, Nan, you have indeed sadly lost touch with the world, child ! 'Twas a magnificent fine gentleman, a noble patron of literature and art——"

" Ay, and of the stage, by your own showing, Kitty." Nan Day spoke smartly. " Pray, Miss Pounce, did you not hear me ? "

Pamela felt sick and faint. She was glad enough of the excuse to crawl away and take a dose of the hartshorn which was kept handy in the workroom in hot weather. When she returned to the showroom to announce that the case was at that moment being opened—her head girl was wrapping all last week's inspirations carefully in tissue for the occasion—she found the company increased by My Lady Verney and Mrs. Lafone, and that well-known personage, Beau Stafford. He was speaking as she entered, and the first words that caught her ear were these :

"I call her Fair Fatality."

Mistress Molly Lafone's shrill accents were then uplifted.

"Why, Mr. Stafford," though she was sister-in-law to the Beau there was small love lost between them, "granting the suicide—to be sure, the poor young man must have been mad—you cannot hold Miss Falcon responsible for Lord Harborough's seizure."

"You know a good deal, Mistress Molly, but you don't know everything. Young Lord Ashmore attacked the Marquis in the street last night. There was a terrible scene between them. Ay, ladies, all on account of that wild bird, the Falcon. Lord Harborough had to call to his footmen—fact, I assure you! Only for the scandal he would have handed his assailant to the watch. 'Twas the shock of hearing of the rash youth's dreadful end, this morning, that has been the death of him. Ay, My Lord Harborough is dead. They were pulling down the blinds of Harborough House as I passed along the Mall."

"Fair Fatality, indeed!" cried Kitty. "And her so young and handsome, and not a six months famous yet."

"Oh, she's a cunning piece!" interposed Molly. "I have heard tales of her ways. They say none knows where she lives, nor where she comes from, nor her real name. She wraps herself in the utmost mystery. Probably," went on the little lady, with her acid titter, "'tis some grocer's daughter! But poor simplicity has no chance, especially with the gentlemen. You must play the romantick."

My Lady Kilcroney, her fingers to her lips, seemed lost in reflection.

"Was there not a story of a duel, Mr. Stafford?"

"A duel, Madam? Five, to my certain knowledge," asseverated the Beau. "And all with more or less serious results."

"Pshaw, 'tis like an Italian tale of the evil eye!" Nan shuddered. "I'll not go to Drury Lane and come

under it, 'tis pos! *Pray, Miss Pounce? Oh, no, not green! Green! Am I never to get away from it?*"

Miss Falcon's fame did not suffer from the double tragedy of which she had been so singularly the cause. She withdrew from the programmes for a week after the funerals of the two unfortunate noblemen, and then reappeared, to play to houses more crowded, more enthusiastic than ever. The wild rumours which began to circulate about her only served to increase the public frenzy.

Pamela Pounce, much occupied with the Walsingham mourning, was for some time unable to gratify her desire to see Fair Fatality act once more; a desire which—so far was she from sharing Lady Anne Day's fears—had now indeed become a kind of obsession. When circumstances permitted her at last to indulge herself, she purchased a ticket in the forefront of the gallery, and prepared to enjoy a couple of hours complicated emotion. To her amazement, at the end of the second act a note was handed to her:

"I have just seen your kind face. Will you be a Friend to me to-night, and come back with me to my house? If you can do me this favour—my heart tells me you will—meet me at the stage door after the last act.

"FELICITY FALCON."

At any time the adventure was one likely to tempt a girl of Pamela's spirit. In present circumstances, wrought to the highest pitch of excitement and interest by the emotions of the drama and the personality of the young play actress, the invitation came to her as the magic fulfilment of a dream. Although never had Miss Falcon's acting been more poignant, more intense in passion and tragedy, the milliner could hardly wait for the drop of the curtain, so eager was she to enter upon what she

could not avoid considering the more thrilling drama still.

The crowds that packed the theatre were so immense, and the determination to recall the favourite so obstinate and prolonged, that it was after considerable delay that Pamela found herself at last at the stage door.

An elegant, sober-looking carriage, with servants in dark liveries, stood in waiting, and just behind it a hackney coach.

Miss Falcon, hooded and cloaked, escorted by a group of gentlemen, stepped forward and took her hand.

"I knew you would come," she whispered. Her manner was preoccupied. "This is no place for introductions," she went on, turning to her escort. "Since it must be, let us even start."

"Sheridan," said one who walked in advance of the others, one, indeed, whom the milliner, with a thumping heart, scarce dared recognise as the heir to the throne, "you accompany the ladies."

The two women drew back while he passed somewhat unsteadily out of the theatre, and was, with discreet bows, ushered to his carriage by all the gentlemen of the party, a single member of which then followed him in. The carriage, evidently to order, moved a few paces up the street and again halted, while the hackney was drawn to the door.

Mr. Sheridan, followed by the other gentlemen, now came back. He offered his right arm to Miss Falcon, and, with some exaggeration of ceremony, which his companions seemed to find humorous, his left to Miss Pounce. After he had handed the ladies into the hackney coach, he paused, laughing at the door.

"What address shall I say, sweet Falcon?" He raised his voice, as for the benefit of those behind him. "Now for the great disclosure!" he cried.

Fair Fatality had a cold smile. Pamela could see her face by the light of the links each side of the theatre portals. It was very pale.

"Pray get in, sir," she said; "the man knows his way."

As they drove off Mr. Sheridan rubbed his hands and laughed again.

"To think that I should be sitting *vis-à-vis* to the fairest intrigue in all London, and actually be going to solve the mystery! Though, to be sure, 'tis no mystery to you, ma'am, I dare swear?"

He looked tentatively at Pamela through the gloom.

They were turning out of a by-street into the main thoroughfare, and Pamela, casting her glance out of the window, was startled, but scarcely surprised, to see that the Prince's carriage was very closely following theirs.

"Why, Pamela, my girl," said the milliner to herself, "little you thought when you set out that you'd perhaps be supping with Royalty! But there's one thing clear. You've got to stand by this poor soul to-night."

Mr. Sheridan did not seem to relish the idea of conversation with Miss Falcon's companion. Pamela, who from the first had fancied that, though carrying his liquor with decorum, he was far from sober, was not sorry to see him fall into a doze. Whether on her side the actress were asleep or not she could not guess, but she never moved nor spoke. The drive was long, and Pamela had lost all her sense of district when the coach was pulled up at last. But Mr. Sheridan, waking with a start and looking eagerly about him, cried:

"Why, this is the King's Road! I'll be hanged if that's not the lodge of Elm Park House."

"This, sir," said Miss Falcon, "is Mulberry House, my poor abode, to which you are——" she paused, and altered her phrase—"where I am this night privileged to receive you."

Pamela understood she would not bid them welcome. At the same moment the royal carriage halted in its turn; but Miss Falcon, alighting, did not pause to pay the respect etiquette demanded. She pushed open the gate, and went quickly across the flagged courtyard towards

the little house which stood square and solid, with pedimented portico, before them.

As Pamela hurried after she saw that a light shone through the cracks of the shuttered ground floor windows. Miss Falcon inserted a key in the lock and opened the house door. She drew Pamela into an oak-panelled hall, dimly lit with a couple of candles in a silver candelabra, and herself stood in the aperture.

She dropped a profound curtsy as the Prince appeared, followed by Mr. Sheridan and that other gentleman whom Pamela supposed to be the equerry-in-waiting.

"Forgive me, sir," her voice was low and tired, and it struck Pamela that something had gone out of it—the fire and thrill and youthful pathos that had made it every moment an appeal—"that you should have such a poor reception. Since I was not prepared for the honour, since it was your pleasure to surprise me by this favour, I must beg you to take me as I am. There are no servants here to-night."

She moved backwards as she spoke. Theatrical training stood her in good stead. The movement was perfect.

"Will you condescend to enter? Mr. Sheridan, pray close the door behind His Highness."

She preceded the Prince, still backing easily, to a parlour on the right of the entrance. It was a small, gay apartment, panelled in white, with double doors leading apparently into an inner room. Four candles on the centre table, burning rather low in their sockets, gave a fairly sufficient light.

Pamela, who slipped in, with some timidity, in the wake of the party, perceived their hostess's face to be deathly pale, and hurried to her side.

Miss Falcon caught her hand with an ice-cold grip.

It must be confessed that the portly, elderly gentleman, who once for his charm and youthful grace had been known as Prince Florizel, looked discomfited to confoundment by the unexpected strangeness of the situation.

His two companions stared at each other. The sobriety they all three needed seemed to be returning to them.

"Will your Highness condescend to take a chair?"

Still holding the milliner's warm hand the play-actress stood erect.

"Sir, it has been your pleasure to command the revelation of a secret which concerned only my humble person. I understand even that you have honoured me so far as to make my insignificance the object of a wager. I trust I am too obedient a subject to disobey my future Sovereign, too loyal not to assist him in the gratification of his sporting instincts. With the more readiness, indeed, that at four o'clock this afternoon my reason for wishing to keep my unimportant identity, my unobtrusive abode from the knowledge of the world has ceased to exist——"

She broke off.

Not more intently had the mighty audience hung upon her lips to-night than did now these four, her oddly entertained guests. Pamela's heart beat high. She felt herself as on the very edge of some fathomless chasm of tragedy.

"Your Royal Highness," went on Felicity Falcon, her sweet voice hoarse, "since it is your pleasure to know it, my name is Gwenlian Morgan. I am the wife——" A spasm crossed her face. She caught her breath, and went on: "I married one Evan Morgan, a Welsh preacher. Ours has been a great love; but with him God was always first. He believed he had a call to London. We left the fair hills and our cottage for these dreadful streets. He failed. He fell into a decline. We had hardly any money left. He could work no more, and he would not take charity. I had to earn for him. How? I had to earn much and quickly or he would die. There was only one way, and that way anathema to him. To his pure and lofty mind the stage was always ruin and damnation!"

Again there was a brief silence. The equerry tried

to whisper to Mr. Sheridan, but that good-hearted gentleman gave him an angry scowl. The Prince sat breathing hard, his eyes fixed, his mouth slightly open.

"There was but one way in which I could earn much and quickly. I took it. I took it in secret. I began low. Fortune favoured me. I was noticed behind the scenes by one whose notice meant advancement. Yes, sir"—she flashed a dark look at the equerry, who murmured a name—"my Lord Harborough was a generous patron; and then all came easy. At home I had but to lie. Good heavens, how I lied and plotted and contrived and deceived! But what did anything matter? There was no crime save unfaithfulness to my Beloved that I would not have committed for his sake. I told him I had inherited a fortune. I kept him almost from the first in comfort. When I was able to hire this house I told him I had sold out funds to do so. He believed me. He trusted me. He would as soon have thought of doubting an angel, as of doubting me. And so I—hoodwinked him. It was the easier that he had to keep to his bed. My one servant, his nurse, deaf and silent, never pried into my comings and goings. She believed, like him, that they were accounted for by the chapel meetings and mission-work; by necessary relaxation and repose. I went in and out of this house at night by the mews at the back. No one ever saw me enter. I took care of that. To-day—to-day the doctor came. He filled me with more hope than ever before. 'Take him to Italy,' he said. 'And 'twill be a cure!' With four thousand pounds in the bank——"

She stopped so suddenly that Pamela cast an arm about her, fearing she might fall; but she clasped a rigid strength. Mr. Sheridan raised his quizzing glass to stare at the actress's countenance; into her pale cheeks a fierce colour had risen. She was amazingly beautiful.

"And so, my dear Miss Falcon—my dear Mrs. Morgan," he cried curiously, "you took the favourable moment of

confessing your subterfuge, your heroic subterfuge, to your pious husband! How did he bear it? A Welshman and a chapel man! I trust it was not a shock."

Her eyes turned upon him as if she were bereft of the power of understanding.

"Mr. Sheridan means, ma'am;" cried the equerry impatiently, "how did the good preacher bear the awful revelation? Did you not yourself say that at four o'clock—four, wasn't it, Sherry?—the great Falcon mystery ceased to exist."

"You are right, sir," said Fair Fatality. "When I returned from rehearsal this afternoon I found—I saw—I knew—there was no secret between us any more! You want to know so much about me, all of you." Her voice rose suddenly and piercingly. "Your curiosity shall be gratified to the end."

She moved away from Pamela with a steady step, flung open the folding doors, and pointed into the room revealed with a single magnificent gesture.

Grasping the elbows of his chair, fuddled, inquisitive, the Prince of Wales lifted himself to stare. Mr. Sheridan took two strides and brought himself up with an ejaculation. And "Damn me!" cried the equerry, in accents of anger and fear. "This is a dashed low trick!"

There was no need for anyone to cast a second glance into that room. The lights and the flowers, the rigid figure on the bed, covered with a white sheet, told their own story. The genial party were looking upon death.

"Oh, you poor creature! You poor, unhappy dear!" cried Pamela Pounce, bursting into hot tears, and catching the Falcon to her heart.

The preacher's wife abandoned herself to the embrace; but only for the span of a moment, not for the relief of tears, not for the comfort of another woman's tenderness, but because, just for that little while, every power fell into suspense. When she disengaged herself they were alone with the dead. Royalty and its boon

companions had seized the opportunity to retire from a scene so discomforting.

Felicity turned an abstracted gaze into the dining-room; it was clear to Pamela that her visitors, Royalty and all, were of less consequence in her mind than the stray moth that fluttered round the candles.

"Will you look at him?" said the widow.

Pamela wished that she would cry or swoon. This composure was terrible. Sobbing herself, she was drawn to the bedside, and, as Felicity lifted the sheet, gazed down upon the quiet, beautiful face. The play-actress bent and kissed the young forehead set in such majestic peace, and replaced the coverlet, re-arranging the white roses after she had done so. Then once more she took her companion by the arm, led her back into the dining-room, and closed the folding-doors.

"Now you must drink a glass of wine with me," she said, "before you go."

"But I will stay with you."

"No. No. The coach is waiting for you. The driver will take you safe back. I prefer to be alone."

She went to a cupboard and drew out a decanter and a couple of glasses, and while Pamela sat and mopped her eyes with a drenched handkerchief, and bit her lip to keep down the rising sob, and chid herself for a poor, vaporous wretch no use to anyone, the woman who had lost her all poured out the wine with a steady hand; and with a steady hand did something else besides.

She brought the glasses to the table, gave one to Pamela, and stood watching her while she drank.

Then she sat down beside her, and, still holding her own full glass between taper fingers, leant across and said:

"Kiss me, my dear, and thank you. When I went back to him after the rehearsal to-day, so full of joy, the woman said he was asleep, and I bent to kiss him, and, oh, his lips were cold! His lips were cold! Yours are warm. I wish I'd known you before. We should have been friends. Nay, 'tis as well! I might have brought

misfortune to you as to the others. 'Tis better as it is," she repeated rather wildly.

And when sobbing that her own story was told and that she knew too what a broken heart meant, Pamela would have kissed her again, Felicity pushed her from her, and drank quickly.

In the silence that followed, Pamela drew herself physically and mentally together, twisted her handkerchief, patted her curls, wiped her eyes a last time, then, in the tone of one firmly determined on the right course of action :

" The coach may go, I'll not leave you ! " she cried.

She broke off. Was it the scent of the flowers from the death-chamber, or some curious flavour in the wine ? She was all at once aware of a singular, intense smell of almonds in the air.

" Miss Falcon, Mrs. Morgan, my dear ! Oh, you're faint, you're ill, and no wonder ! "

She clutched the sinking figure, but Fair Fatality had acted her last tragedy.

Pamela Pounce never wore the Medusa ring. She dared not ; but she kept it all her life.

CHAPTER XI

In Which There is a Prodigious Scandal About Pink Flounces

None ever knew the share which Pamela had taken in Felicity Falcon's last night on earth.

She had laid the slender figure as decently and respectfully as she could, on a couch, kissed the cold cheek once more, and walked out of the house.

Those who would find her in the morning must make what they could of the story. Pamela had her own life and those dependent on her to consider. She could not afford to be mixed up with a scandal.

Whether the chapel people to whose ranks the young preacher had belonged, were desirous of hushing up the evidence which might bring discredit upon them, or whether it were really believed that Mrs. Morgan had died of a heart-stroke brought on by grief did not transpire. They were buried together and given a very pious funeral with much preaching and psalm-singing.

The event made a profound impression upon Pamela; it revived the cruel emotions of her recent personal experience.

She had seen what love meant as never before; she understood its fearful supremacy, and how little anything else mattered beside it in life. There were times when she even envied Felicity Falcon; true, she had loved to desperation and death, but she had loved and been loved with a noble purity and faithfulness!

The memory of the young Welsh preacher's dead face, radiantly innocent, and of the triumph, set in agony, of

the actress's countenance as she had last seen it, haunted her continually. Death had stamped on their mortal love the seal of eternity.

Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs had lain in wait, the whole warm June sunset hour, till Miss Pounce should emerge from the side-door of the shut-up shop; he followed the erect, briskly walking figure with due discretion, and only permitted himself to catch her up at the corner of Berkeley Square. Then he accosted her.

"Don't, I do beseech you," he cried, quickly forestalling the fierce repudiation in her eye, "don't refuse to listen! I have not come after you to insult you, I haven't, upon my honour! Pamela, I want to apologise. I want to ask your pardon."

His tone was so imploring and respectful, he looked so eager, so gallant and handsome too, in the rosy amber light, as he bent towards her, bare-headed, that her weapon of pride seemed broken in her hand.

She tried to say with dignity: "There's nothing more that I ever wish to hear from you, Mr. Bellairs," but her voice faltered, and a sudden tear in each eye betrayed her.

"See," he went on eagerly. "The gate of the garden there is open. Let us go in, and sit on that bench. Just for a little while! Five minutes! One minute!"

Pamela, shaking her head, and exclaiming: "No, sir. Nay, Mr. Bellairs, I cannot listen, 'tis impossible! 'Tis wrong! 'Tis folly!" nevertheless allowed herself to be drawn into the cool green tree-shadowed spot, and actually sat down on the suggested seat.

He did not as much as offer her his hand; yet his urgency drove her almost with a physical force.

"Oh, Pamela," he cried, letting himself fall beside her, and clasping his hands and wringing them, "can you conceive what I felt when I heard that 'twas you—you!—oh, my generous girl—who paid my debt? And

to think how the first use I made of my liberty was to offend you so grossly."

Pamela swallowed a sob.

" 'Tis over and done with now, Mr. Bellairs. Let me forget."

She tried to rise, but he caught a fold of her dress.

" One moment more, if you have a woman's heart. Nay, you see how anxious I am not to presume. I will go on my knees if you like. Oh, Pamela, when I went to pay back my Lord his ninety-seven pound ten, out of that pocketful of money you know of, and he stared at me, and : ' Why, man,' says he, ' I never thought to see you this morning ! Her Ladyship was in one of her bad ways, and sure, if it was I had been in the sponging house, she'd not have out with a farthing ! I've been but waiting for a better moment,' says he. ' Then who, in the name o' God ? ' cries I, cutting him short. Pamela, I lost no time in making my *congé* to my Lord, and I ran all the way to that fellow Jobbins—I promise you ! ' For I'll get to the bottom of this,' I cried. ' And 'twas a lady veiled,' quoth he, and stuck to it, and the fool that I am, must needs think my cousin Kitty was playing a sort of game with me ; ashamed not to pay for me, but, the stingy thing ! mortal afraid lest I should ask her again ! And I went back again to Hertford Street to make a further exhibition of myself."

Here Pamela could not keep from laughter.

" You laugh ! 'Tis all I deserve. Indeed, 'twas a monstrous absurd scene. But my Lady pretty soon convinced me that the magnanimity I ascribed to her was unknown to that bit of strass she calls her heart. By the Lord, I think I was mad that morning altogether ! I hardly know how I got out of Hertford Street once more, and all the way down to Jobbins, for the thought had dawned ! I've not so many friends, you see, Pamela ! ' A tall, fine figure of a lady,' says he, ' stepping as clean as your own sorrel filly, Mr. Jocelyn. And I caught,' says he, ' a gleam of hair under the veil—now, if you'll

run your eye down the row in there,' says he, jerking his thumb towards his stables, ' you'll see, third from the door, a bit of a gloss on a hack's back that's just the same colour.' And so I knew," added Jocelyn, with a sudden drop from his tone of mimicry, into accents of real emotion.

Pamela set her teeth upon her trembling lip. She made a desperate effort after her usual fine air of independence.

" 'Twas when we were friends, I'll have you remember, Mr. Bellairs," she said, with a toss of her head.

" Ah, but Pamela, let us be friends now," he spoke with a boyish earnestness which made him infinitely more attractive than in his most dashing mood of sparkishness. " 'Tis just for that I have sought you. I want your forgiveness. I want your friendship. Let me see you sometimes, as a friend, a most respectful friend, honoured by your acquaintance. I am a wretched, worthless fellow," he went on, with a kind of bitter humility. " I can't even pay you back your loan, now, Pamela. But grant me a chance. Let me show myself better than you have known me. 'Pon honour, it would give me something to hope for, just to think you'd let me see you now and again, in a kindly way ; that you had not cast me altogether out of your life."

It was the acknowledgment that he couldn't pay her back that softened Miss Pounce's obduracy towards him. She consented to forgive him, to consider him as a friend, even to admit the possibility that if they met—oh, quite accidentally !—on an off-day, she mightn't refuse to take a stroll with him in the Green Park.

It would seem as if nothing had changed ; as if she was the same too-trusting, foolish girl, and he the same sly, audacious villain ; yet, as she determinedly parted from him and hurried out of the garden to her lodging, she knew that there had come a profound alteration into their relations.

Meanwhile the enmity excited in the bosoms of Miss Smithson and Miss Popple against the successful milliner was far from abating. Indeed, the mature young lady who had hoped for Pamela Pounce's present position had an ever-gathering sense of grievance. What if she had a heavy hand? Were there not solid dowagers and others who preferred substance and money's worth to your fly-away gossamer nothings?

Between these two important members of Madame Mirabel's establishment, there had come to be a tacit understanding—though they were far too genteel and high-minded to indulge in anything like a conspiracy—that it was their bounden duty, in dear Madame Mirabel's interests, to keep a sharp look-out on Miss Pounce, and report any proceeding of hers calculated to injure them

"As, of course, my dear, poor Anna-Maria," Clara Smithson would declare of her rich business relative, "is that good-natured that times and times I've had to step in, as it were, and save her from herself."

Miss Popple was too tactful to request specification.

"La, you never say, dear!" she would exclaim, with unflagging emphasis. "And what a good thing it is that she's got you, the poor kind creature! 'Tis what we all feel."

The while her private thoughts would run contemptuously:

"As if every one didn't know, you long-toothed old frump, that 'tis you Madame keeps on out of charity, and has the books regular checked by a spry young gentleman from the bank every Saturday night, private, or they'd be in the muddle of the world before the month was out!"

Miss Clara Smithson's secret opinion of Miss Popple was probably no more complimentary, but it is in the nature of things that worthy individuals, working for a common cause, should sink personal feelings; and, therefore, when Miss Smithson made the appalling discovery in connection with the pink-flounced muslin of a

Sunday afternoon, it was Miss Popple to whom she confided it the first thing on Monday morning.

That Sunday afternoon being a remarkably fine day, Miss Smithson had accepted the offer of the married nephew in the Tobacco Trade, who was particularly civil to her in view of her reported savings, to drive with him in a hackney as far as Richmond Park, and partake of a choice refection of ale and winkles by the river-side. Now, as the hackney was rolling along the highway towards Richmond, they passed a cottage on the outskirts of the town, a quite superior cottage residence with an embowered garden, honeysuckle and roses. In this garden, upon a rustic chair, a young woman was seated with a child upon her lap. She wore a conspicuous dress of pink muslin. Her head, which was bent over the child, was bare, unpowdered, and clothed with a profusion of bright chestnut tresses. The child's face, Miss Smithson was able to observe, was very dark, almost foreign-looking, and its little curly pate, coppery-red.

There was something familiar in the attitude of the young person in the flaring frock, and Miss Smithson, who was not a rapid thinker, puzzled over it most of the afternoon. Towards the end of her last glass of ale, neglecting the tempting offer of a final winkle which the devoted nephew was extending to her on his tie-pin, she clapped her hands and cried:

"I have it!"

Being asked to explain this strange diversion from the business of the hour, she declined, and it was only into the sympathetic bosom of Miss Popple that she now unfolded her theories.

"Pamela Pounce it was, my dear, as I'm a living sinner! There's not another head like that on the town, I'll swear! And a little black child on her lap, as bold as brass! Miss is so fashionable, too, as we all know. Foh, the hussy! It really," said the virtuous Miss Smithson, "makes me shudder!"

And shudder she did, till Miss Popple thought she heard her bones rattle.

"I always said," said Polly Popple, "that there was something mysterious about that young woman's private life. Dark, did you say, dear? We all know the complexion of the young gentleman that used to come here after Miss Pounce. And she's been seen with him in the Green Park again, most audacious of late. And what's to be done now," she cried in a virtuous passion, "to get her out of the house, and not have her contaminating us respectable females? Let's to Madame Mirabel this moment!"

"Beware how you do such a thing!" exclaimed Miss Smithson, horror-struck. "Tut, Polly! We've got to get things a vast more circumspect before we take such precipitous action. The first thing to find out is whether Miss Pounce has a gown of that impudent colour."

"I'll ask her this minute!" exclaimed Popple, springing up from the little horsehair chair and making for the door.

"And if we do bring it home to her, Polly," pursued Miss Smithson, clutching her friend's fat wrist, "far be it from me to be hard on a fellow-creature, however perverted and brazen. I'd rather put the matter before Miss Pounce herself—ay, and before that good creature, her aunt, my Lady Kilcroney's woman, who's had a mort of trouble with her already—and get the abandoned gal to send in her resignation, rather than upset my cousin! Anna-Maria has a weak heart."

Polly Popple pondered. Both prudent virgins exchanged a look. It dawned upon these sensitive consciences that Madame Mirabel might not be of their way of thinking; might, in fine, be disposed to put modes before morals, especially as custom was increasing every day and the fame of Pounce millinery spreading far and wide.

"Maybe you're right," said Polly thoughtfully. "Well, I'll be back as soon as I can, dear, and let you know what I've drawn out of her."

The showroom was empty of custom, the hour being still early, and Pamela, singing a little song under her breath, was engaged, with the bright energy which characterised her, in superintending the disposal of the wares. She had fanciful schemes of colour differing with each day, and subtly suited to the mood most likely to be engendered by the weather. Thus, on a cold, bleak autumn afternoon you might find a flamingo flame of feather calling you through the glass; and on a torrid July morning such as the present, the coolest and most ethereal creams and greys; or a rustic straw with a wreath of moon daisies that would set you dreaming of the country. Even such a creation was Miss Pounce now holding in her hand when, rather out of breath—for she was of a stout habit and a congested type of comeliness—Polly Popple came heavily up to her.

"And. pray, Miss Pounce," said the assistant, while, at the abruptness of the address, unpreceded by the usual "Good morning," all the young ladies turned to stare—"pray, Miss Pounce, was you by any chance Richmond way yesterday?"

Polly was no diplomatist.

"And what's that to you, Miss Popple?" responded Pamela. "As a matter of fact, I was; but 'tain't none of your business, as I'm aware! Girls, what are you doing?"

Pamela scented mischief, and resented the tone of the question, which rang in unmistakable challenge. Nevertheless, she remained good-humoured.

"Perhaps," said the other darkly, "'tis more my business than you think of. Might I further inquire if you was wearing a pink gown, miss?"

"Yes, Popple, I was. A pink gown, flounced to the waist, muslin. A sweet thing it is, and suits me uncommon. Perhaps you'd like to know if I wear a white *bouffand* to it, and the style of hat?"

"Oh, never mind the hat, Miss Pounce! Since you are so obleeging as to permit me another question, might

I ask if you was a-setting in a garden a-holding of a child upon your lap ? "

The colour flew like a flag to the head milliner's cheek and fire to her eye. Then she abruptly turned her back upon the questioner, and the youngest assistant, who happened to be taking a hat out of a drawer, was surprised to see that she was struggling with a violent inclination to laugh.

" Ho ! "

The ejaculation leaped with a world of horror from Polly's lips.

Her superior wheeled back upon her.

" Yes, Miss Popple, I was sitting in a garden, and very pleasant it was among the roses ; and I had a child upon my lap, the dearest, sweetest little creature that ever breathed, a perfect cherub ! A girl, if you want to know, Miss Popple, and though dark, like to be a beauty."

The young ladies tittered, though there were looks interchanged, too. And Pamela's tone, tripped up with subterranean mirth, sounded to some of them rather hysterical.

Polly, after a dumb show of wounded female delicacy, expressively rendered, tottered from the room as if her legs could scarce carry so much horrified rectitude ; and the incident apparently dropped. Indeed, Pamela regarded it merely as another of Popple's nasty bits of spleen. A low-minded, common creature ! As if her girls would be taken in by such vile suggestions ! As if the life of Pamela Pounce, head milliner, was not as fresh and fair as her own face !

An episode which Pamela could not but consider as curious in the circumstances presently occurred and drove the very existence of Popple from her mind.

A carriage drew up to the door, early as it was—ten o'clock had not yet struck—and a customer entered, a short, dark young woman of a marked type of Spanish beauty, who walked with a bold cadence of the hips that set her maize silk panniers swinging, and a carriage of

the head that you might call like that of a fawn, or of a serpent, as your feelings towards her prompted.

Pamela advanced in her most engaging manner.

"What can I do for you, madam?" She broke off. "Merciful heavens!" something within her cried. "I should know that face."

The newcomer fixed her with beautiful, insolent eyes. There was a gleam of rubies in each delicate ear, and at the dusky round throat a red fire that came and went from a monstrous clasp of the same stones, half-hidden by laces.

"If you will show me a hat, all black, with black feathers," began the lady. She had a slow voice, rich like cream, and an odd guttural aspiration of the consonants. "Something with the Spanish air."

In her turn, she stopped short. The milliner had fallen back a pace, and was looking at her with horror.

"I think," said Pamela, very low but very distinctly, "that you have entered this establishment by mistake."

The foreign lady wheeled upon her. There was no doubt about it, with all her beauty she was viperish.

"Fool, my name is the Countess Sanquhar!"

"And a very fit name for you, too!" responded Pamela.

Upon which extraordinary observation she herself opened the door and stood until the visitor passed out.

You may be a beauty, and you may be the lawful wife of an English peer, but it is difficult to keep your dignity when you are turned out of a shop by a miserable working woman as if you were the last of the last. Only by doing murder on her offender could the notorious Lady Sanquhar, who had been once the respected wife of an honest Spanish merchant, have redeemed the situation from utter ignominy. But as she could not do murder in actual fact, she only did it with her eyes, as, swaying more than ever, she went forth.

Pamela shut the door; the four assistants stared at

her with one accord. They had not known such an exciting morning for a long time.

"Upon my word, Miss Pounce," said Polly Popple, "you take a deal upon yourself, you do."

Pamela sat down, rather white about the lips, breathing quickly through dilated nostrils.

"If it had got known that I'd sold as much as a feather to that creature," she said, "Madame Mirabel might as well put up her shutters, for there's not a lady of quality would have crossed the threshold of her showroom again."

CHAPTER XII

In which my Lady Kilcroney Insists on the Duty of Morality.

"If you please, my Lady, might I speak to your Ladyship?"

My Lady Kilcroney looked up from the sorrows of Miss Clarissa Harlowe, which she was particularly enjoying, and gazed at her handmaiden.

Lydia Pounce and her mistress had gone through, together, so many emotions, intrigues, quarrels, reconciliations, triumphs, and despairs that it was scarcely too much to say they had become indispensable to each other. Therefore, too, both had grown to read each other's countenances with the utmost facility. Now, Lydia was pale and pinched; her knobby little hands were clasping each other fiercely across her neat waistband; she was visibly trembling. Lady Kilcroney knew these symptoms.

"What is to do, Lydia?"

"Ho, my Lady!"

The Abigail here clutched at her heart and turned up her eyes.

"Dear me, Lydia," said her Ladyship, tartly, "have they ventured to laugh again in the pantry as you happened to be passing, or has anyone broken into the safe and stolen my diamonds?"

"Ho, your Ladyship, you may well ask. Heaven knows I'm prepared from this out to be the laughing-stock of this house. Every one may point the finger of scorn at me. The name of Pounce is for ever blasted! As

for thieves, my Lady, there are worse thieves than will ever be hanged walking about this moment, and treasures stolen of value far above diamonds ! "

" Dear me ! "

" Her Ladyship wouldn't be so easy with her ' dear me's ' if she knew what's happened. 'Tis gospel truth, my Lady, and I'm telling no falsehood, that the thought of having to inform your Ladyship is the bitterest part of the sorrow that has come upon me this day ! "

Kitty Kilcroney put down her book. Seeing that her maid's eyes were genuinely tear-stained, and that the convulsive shiverings were not all assumed, she began to feel concern.

" Dear me ! " she said again, in quite another tone. " I trust nothing has happened to your family—your good brother, or any of the children ? "

She broke off. Lydia, who was making the most dreadful grimaces, here flung her little muslin apron over her head and sobbed behind it.

" It'll break my brother's heart, him so respected on his own property, as old in the name as gentry, yeomen these hundreds of years, and only for bad times none of them ever looking to service. And ho ! my Lady, him setting such store by that girl, and me so proud of her ! "

" That girl ! You don't mean Pamela ? "

Lydia dropped the apron.

" I do. The horrid, wicked creature. And ho, my Lady, it all comes of encouraging idle young gentlemen and paying their debts for them, and letting them off going to India, and if the name of Pounce is blasted, the name of Bellairs ain't much better, and so I tell you, fair and square, my Lady ! "

" Good heavens ! " said my Lady Kilcroney, whisking round so sharply on the sofa that Clarissa fell in one direction, and my Lady's cushions, fan, and pocket handkerchief in the other. " Never tell me that that silly young man is—has been—can be——"

" He was, he is, and as to can be, your Ladyship knows

yourself what young gentlemen are! Oh, to think of its going on so long, though indeed, I might ha' known! Haven't I seen them walking together on a Sunday afternoon, times and again, and it's all head toss and 'How dare you, aunt?' if so much as a word of warning is given!"

"Jocelyn Bellairs! But what has been discovered? What proof have you?"

"Oh, la!" The fire of excitement was drying up the elder Miss Pounce's tears. "'Tis all over Mirabel's already. Proof, my Lady? Wasn't the unfortunate girl seen sitting in a garden last Sunday in a secret cottage, with a dark baby on her lap? *A dark baby, my Lady!* And think of Mr. Bellairs, as black as my shoe! And her, as Miss Smithson—that's the book-keeper, my Lady—who has just left me, said to me, as bold as brass, all in the sunshine. And she ain't denied nothing, neither."

"Who? Pamela?"

Kitty was falling from amazement to amazement. She had seen a vast deal, one way and another, of Madame Mirabel's milliner, and if ever there was, in her opinion, an honest, sensible, good-living young woman, it was Pamela Pounce.

"She don't deny it. Miss Popple up and taxed her straight out, and she as good as admitted it. Not a bit ashamed, either."

"Foh!" my Lady fumed. "Surely you're not going to condemn your own flesh and blood on hearsay, woman?

"My Lady," Lydia began to pant, as if she suddenly remembered how hard she had been running. "I'm back from Madame Mirabel's this moment, and seen Pamela, and oh, the audacity of her! Laughing in my face, and tossing her head! 'And 'tis true,' cries she, 'the little rogue is dark. And if I prefer 'em dark,' says she, 'what then?'"

"'Ho, Miss,' says I, 'your taste lies in the dark line,' says I. 'That's no surprise to me you bold hussy!'

And then, my Lady, you'll never believe it, she regular insulted me.

" ' Well,' she says, ' and if I do prefer a dark gentleman, ain't a body free to have their fancy ? There's you,' she says, ' as likes them fat and cat-footed, with a wheeze and a paunch,' referring, my Lady, to the attentions Mr. Blandfoot is paying me. And then I answers her back :

" ' I'm sure, you wicked girl, if Mr. Blandfoot and I ever agree to settle, it'll be as man and wife, respectable *and* respected.' "

" ' Why, lud, aunt,' she says, ' you have a nasty mind.' And more than that, my Lady, I couldn't get out of her, it being her busy time. And—oh, dear, to be sure !—was there ever such a desperate bit of work ? Her getting on so well, fought over by the ladies, I may say !

Lady Kilcroney allowed the lamentations to continue without interruption for some time, her own thoughts being concentrated on the painful problem. The more she reflected upon it, the more, alas ! she began to believe in the story.

Old Bellairs's nephew was a sad dog—a handsome, plausible, dashing, insidious rascal—she knew that. And that he had pursued Pamela with his attentions, she was also aware. The girl's attitude of defiance could hardly go with innocence, and there was that strange story about the debt. Now, Kitty liked Pamela, and she had a certain sympathy, too, with a spirit that refused to humiliate itself on a question of private conduct.

" I trust no one has ever been able to say of me that I am otherwise than strictly virtuous," she thought, " but I can't abide these prying prudes that think 'tis their business to show up any poor child that's made a slip in her time."

" And, ho, my Lady," concluded Lydia, " they've kept it from Madame Mirabel, on condition that my niece resigns her situation."

" Now, look here, Lydia, stop sniffing. If 'tis my poor dear Bellairs's nephew that wronged the girl, I'll see that

he makes reparation. He shall marry her., Leave it to me. Leave it to me, I say! I'll have the truth out of them both, and then I'll join their hands, I swear it, before I'm two days older!"

Kitty was one of those whose plans are swiftly conceived and whose impatient spirit will not brook an instant's delay in their execution. She sat down that very moment to write to her graceless relative.

"He must not guess," she thought, as her quill ran with little squeaks and pauses—"he must not guess that he is to be brought to book, or my young gentleman will have a thousand good reasons for declining to present himself."

"*Dear Nephew Jocelyn,*" wrote she, very silkily—"*Pray come and visit me this next Thursday afternoon at three of the clock. It is a long time since we have met, and there is a little matter*——"

Here Kitty stopped and nibbled at her pen. How could she bait the trap so that the fox should fall into it?

"*a little matter which I wish to discuss with you. I think when you hear what it is, you will agree 'twas worth wasting half an hour on your attached aunt-in-law,*

"KITTY KILCRONEY."

Kitty shook the pounce-box over the sheet, folded, superscribed, and affixed with a pat a knowing little wafer which bore the semblance of a rose with the touching motto: "Sweet unto death."

Then, popping her round chin on her clasped hands, she gave herself to reflection, quite a minute's reflection.

"If you want a thing well done, do it yourself. There never was a sounder saw. I'll not trust Lydia."

My Lady took up her pen again.

"*My good Pounce*"—thus ran the quill—"*Pray present yourself here on Thursday at three o'clock, bringing*

the dark baby about which there's such a to-do. I think I have proved myself a friend to you; do you prove that you recognise it by falling in with my desire.

" K. KILCRONEY.

" *P.S.—I was never more anxious to act well by you than in this instance.*"

Having despatched these missives, my Lady kept her counsel; and when the answers came—Mr. Bellairs's reply accepting rather effusively, with indeed, as his benefactress felt, not without some malice, a lively sense of favours to come; and Pamela's in four respectful lines couched in the best millinery phraseology—the plotter locked them into her bureau, and forbade Lydia to mention the subject to her again, if she valued her situation.

On the Thursday afternoon fixed for the meeting my Lady Kilcroney thoroughly prepared to enjoy herself. There was nothing she more relished than the ruling of a difficult situation. She had no qualms as to the extent of her genius; she had no inconvenient scruples as to her wisdom.

The nephew of her late poor Bellairs had, it seemed, wronged the young person in whom she took an interest. He should be made to right that wrong, or her name was not Kitty Kilcroney.

When the hour approached she clothed herself in garments subtly adapted to her role, rich in texture, yet grave in hue; a mulberry satin, to be precise, brocaded with amber roses. Her toilet accomplished, she flung a satisfied look into her mirror. 'Twas a bit heavy for a summer's day, but really, with the old deep-hued lace at throat and elbows, mightily becoming.

Then she wheeled upon her maid.

" Now, Lydia," ordered she, " you are not to show your nose till I bid you. I'll not have you poking it into my arrangements. It's a deal too sharp and fond of prying, as it is. Ay, I do expect your niece and Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs. And, no, I haven't told you anything

about it. I'm to manage this business or I wash my hands of it. If you goggle your eyes any more, Lydia, they will drop out! Nay, I will not permit you a word with Pamela. Nay, not so much as a look at her. You will keep to your premises till I ring my bell."

Lydia tossed her head a good deal, and was sure she was very grateful to her Ladyship. And no one could accuse her of wanting to interfere, Heaven knew! And, as for looking at that creature's bold face again till she was an honest woman, it was enough for her the last time. Heaven was her witness that she'd had a queasiness at the pit of the stomach ever since!

Having issued her instructions, Kitty sailed downstairs, turned the astonished Kilcroney out of his library, which had, she considered, a more judicial appearance than the gold-and-white drawing-room, ordered my Lord, in the determined tone which he never resisted, to his club till dinner-time; rang for a couple of footmen to remove my Lord's tankard, pipe and other witnesses of loose living from the premises, and sat herself down in a large leather arm-chair to await the sinners.

Three had not yet struck from the grandfather clock in the corner when Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs was announced. He entered with rather less of the conquering air than was his wont. No doubt a very handsome youth, and vastly improved in manners, thought Kitty, noting the exact depth of his bow and the decorous air of homage with which he kissed her extended hand. Attired, too, with a quiet elegance, which, considering that the hand he saluted was the one which had frequently paid his tailor, was, my Lady considered, well chosen.

"Pray sit down, Nephew Jocelyn. I am glad to see you."

When she had resumed her position in the seat of justice, and he had deferentially placed himself in a high-backed chair—a little too near her, she thought, for proper respect, but some slight familiarity might be pardoned to a relative—he looked at her interrogatively, and there ensued a silence.

It was not Kitty's policy to put him at his ease by small talk; rather, indeed, through a certain measured severity, to awaken stirs of conscience. And as now his fine brown orbs took the inward roll which she knew betokened self-searching, she kept an immovable countenance, looking down at her brocade lap and smoothing a fold here and there with delicate, be-ringed fingers. She had considerable knowledge of the world, this spoilt, pretty child of fortune!

"I'll wager," thought she, "he's counting up his debts, and wondering which I've heard of, and never giving a thought to his horrid immorality."

Mr. Bellairs cleared his throat, glanced uneasily at his hostess, began a sentence on the subject of the weather, broke off in the middle and said, with a plunge:

"Here I am, then, Aunt Kilcroney, agreeable to your command!"

"And, indeed, 'tis no less than your duty, I should think. 'Tis a vast of time, sir, since you have done me the honour to call upon me. Yet I think each quarter day brings you the wherewithal to remember me by, to say the least of it."

He looked at her with an expression in which relief and disappointment struggled. Was it only to keep him to heel, like a well-trained dog, that she had sent for him? Was there nothing but huffiness at his lack of assiduity to account for her air of disapproval, or had she heard of that little bill to which my Lord Kilcroney had so good-naturedly set his name? Or of that ruffling night at the Cocoa Tree when he had lost four hundred pounds to my Lord Sanquhar, and thereafter raised the money to settle it with Mr. Aaron, on my lady's own banker's order to himself? A transaction which might have been ruin indeed if the most generous girl in all the world had not got him out of the sponging house in time. Here his cogitations came to an abrupt end, and the very person in his thoughts stood in the doorway.

He got up, all amazement, as my lady too, majestically

rose. What in the name of Heaven brought Pamela Pounce hither, and why, by all that was crazy, was she carrying a little dark child in her arms ?

The young man flushed, bit his lip, and trembled with a sudden fury. By Heaven, if Pamela had gone behind his back to tattle to my Lady, he would—yes, dash it, he would pay her back and never speak to the chit again !

" Is this the child ? " said Kitty, with a bell-like tone of melancholy.

Pamela curtsied with great deliberation for all reply, and, at a wave of Kitty's hand, gracefully sat down, settling her pretty burthen in her lap.

It was a little girl, beautiful in a dark way, with devouring brown eyes. She was exquisitely dressed in a lawn frock, with insertion and mignonette trimming. The Princess Amelia could not have been finer clad, thought Kitty, and as Pamela took off the straw hat with the ostrich feathers and revealed an ordered tangle of copper curls, which would one day be night-black, threaded through with a faint blue ribbon, my lady could hardly restrain a cry of admiration.

Kitty stood and looked at Mr. Bellairs. He was in the throes of undeniable agitation. She looked at Pamela, serene and, as she gazed down at the child, Kitty thought, lovely, with a maternal softening of her bright, handsome face.

" Ah, Jocelyn Bellairs ! " cried Lady Kilcroney, dramatically, " you may well turn away. You may well feel that sight were more than you can endure. But raise your eyes, sir. Behold, behold, and let your heart speak. Can you call yourself a man and refuse that trusting creature her rights, refuse that exquisite cherub a father's name ? "

" Good Lord ! " cried Jocelyn. He cast the hat he had been clasping under his arm into the middle of the room, the better to clutch his temples. " Am I stark, staring mad ? What monstrous stroke is this, what plot, what inconceivable mistake ? "

There was such a ring of truth in his accents that my Lady shot a doubting glance at Pamela, but conviction returned upon her as she saw this young woman bending over the child so as to hide her face, and shaken with hysterical emotion.

Kitty drew a long breath, and started again.

" Do not think, nephew, that by adding deceit to your vileness, you can make a better situation for yourself. Far from it. I have not sent for you here to-day to rebuke or even to reproach. My sole desire is to help you both. Heaven forbid that I should be hard on any woman who has been betrayed by her own heart !

" Pamela, if you had confided in me ere this—nay, never mind now ! Suffice it that I know all. As for you, sir, I am well aware that gentlemen think all too lightly of a woman's virtue ; that if their fancy leads them to court in a lower class than their own, the most hitherto virtuous and confiding female becomes, to use their own horrid words, fair game.

" But I'll not have Pamela Pounce treated so ! She's far too good for you, sir, and so I tell you straight. And the proposal which I am about to make to you is for her sake, and not for yours. You shall marry this good young woman—good but for you, you scamp !—and I shall make it my business to place you in an advantageous position out of England. I'll pay your debts again, sir, and set you up. I have not thought where yet, but it shall not be India, for the little angel's sake——"

Here she stopped suddenly. Her eye strayed to the child, and she saw, to her utter amazement, that the young milliner was laughing, not weeping.

" Pamela Pounce ! " she cried, in a scandalized voice.

Pamela got up and set the child on the floor.

" Will your Ladyship observe the little one ? She is small for her age, I know, nevertheless it is plain to see she is over two years. How old are you, Carmelita ? Tell the lady."

The child, who had maintained a solemn observant

silence during the whole proceeding, her great eyes roaming from one person to another, while she contentedly sat on Pamela's lap, now looked up into her friend's face with a roguish smile.

"Tell the pretty lady."

"Tell you," said the child.

"Well, then, tell Pamela."

But with the perversity of its sex and years, the child was here seized with overwhelming giggles and buried its head in Pamela's skirt.

Kitty was staring with her mouth and eyes open, while a dawning sense of something utterly ludicrous and amazing showed itself on her face.

"If her Ladyship will kindly tax her memory," Pamela spoke in ineradicable bonnet-shop phraseology—"to the extent of recollecting that I met Mr. Bellairs for the first time on the door step of this house but eighteen months ago, she will realise that——"

"Enough! Enough!" cried Kitty.

She waved her hand, fell back into her arm-chair, pressing her filmy handkerchief to her lips, trying to check her peals of laughter. Perhaps she was not quite so overwhelmed with merriment as she pretended. Perhaps she felt that the only way of mitigating the supreme ridicule of her situation was by being the first to laugh at it.

As her patroness laughed, Pamela waxed serious, while Jocelyn Bellairs stood scarlet and indignant, the picture of offence and injured rectitude.

"I little thought, my Lady, when those cats at Mirabel's got hold of my cat of an aunt—begging your Ladyship's pardon—and started this scandal against me, and all along of seeing my pink flounces at tea with old Madame Guturez, this darling's grandmother, I little thought your Ladyship would be ready to believe such an outrageous bit of spiteful nonsense.

"When they upped and attacked me, says I to them, 'Mind your own business!' Heaven be good to me,"

said Pamela. "I wasn't going to stoop to defend myself to them, and if I hadn't been the best-natured girl in the world, I'd have gone straight to Madam Mirabel, and told her then and there of their plot!

"And as for Aunt Lydia—well, her ladyship knows herself. Those old maids have the minds of I don't know what. It's enough to be young and good-looking for them to think the worst of you. And her a-drawing in Mr. Bellairs so shameful. I don't mind confessing to you, my Lady, that the more that poor old thing shook and shivered, and went on at me, the more I thought it would be a fine joke to let her give herself away. But when it comes to your Ladyship——"

"Well, well," said Kitty, not quite liking the tirade, with pansy eyes rather angry over tightly smiling lips. "You had but to write me three words of explanation, Pamela——"

"Begging your Ladyship's pardon, if I'd explained ever so, your Ladyship wouldn't have believed. No lady would ever believe a poor girl accused like me, if she didn't bring up proof. And allow me to point out, your Ladyship," went on the milliner, with a flourish, as if she were indicating some remarkable feather or trimming, "that your Ladyship having merely wrote me to come round with the child, it wouldn't have been becoming in me to be attributing meanings to your Ladyship's commands."

The fire went out of Kitty's eyes, for she was a just woman; she laughed again, and this time with a genuine ring.

"Why, was there ever such a girl! And I so moved over your story, and so yearning over the child, and so stirred up, ready to threaten and appeal. And so pleased with myself to be standing such a friend to you, and bringing Master Jocelyn to book so clever!"

"Nay," said Pamela, "she's not mine at all." Here she swung the little creature up into her arms, and hugged her. "And I'm sure I wish she was. There, I don't

know what I wouldn't have gone through to have such a little darling as this all my own! No, she's not mine, your Ladyship. Poor innocent. Ah, 'tis cruel! It's worse than no mother at all she has, her that's the child of the wretch that calls herself Lady Sanquhar."

Both Kitty and her nephew-by-law cried out at this; Master Jocelyn was shaken from his injured mood by sudden memories.

"What, that odious, bold-faced, dressed-up strumpet!" exclaimed Kitty, "driving about in the park in his Lordship's curricle, and brazening it at the Opera, till a woman of virtue scarce knows which way to look!" and:

"The Spanish woman that ran away with Lord Sanquhar!" shouted Mr. Bellairs, "whose husband was shot before my very eyes as he was trying to stop her? Aye, aye, I remember there was a little child."

"And only three days ago," said Pamela, "I turned the woman out of the shop. 'Tis transported she'd be, if justice were done."

At this my Lady Kilcroney stepped across the room and embraced Miss Pamela Pounce. Then she kissed the child, too, with lingering, repeated caress, that round velvet cheek stirring irresistible motherly passions.

"And it shall have a cake, it shall, and nice chockey to drink, it shall, the pretty rogue! Ring the bell, Jocelyn."

Having obeyed, Mr. Bellairs advanced, nostrils dilated, swaggering a little as he came, with a defiant smartness which did not sit ill on him.

"I presume, Aunt Kilcroney, that as there is nothing else upon which you can desire to confer with me, you would wish me to withdraw. Nevertheless, there is one word I should like to say in your hearing to Miss Pamela Pounce. Will you spare me a hand, Pamela. Thank you. I kiss this honest hand, this honest, kindly, helpful hand, and I say that if you will condescend to bestow it on me, I will——"

But Pamela drew away her fingers, and curtsying, child and all, said with great dignity:

"Thank you, Mr. Bellairs, I have no intention of changing my state."

Kitty looked doubtfully from one to the other. Had he been in earnest? She saw that Pamela did not think so, for the girl had coloured to the roots of her hair, and tossed her head. She would have no gentleman's pity or condescension.

The countenance of the young man was inscrutable, as he bowed very low, turned on his heel, and left the room.

* * * * *

It was past nine that evening before Madame Mirabel's head milliner had sufficiently made up her afternoon's holiday to be able to leave the workroom. There was a purple twilight over the whole busy town, and the lamplighter was going round with his ladder, leaving a jonquil flame behind him at long intervals. Here and there a torch flared in a link. The streets were full of the sound of feet, the quick feet of those hurrying home, the slow feet of the strollers. Pamela was tired; the day had been a long and agitating one. She paused a moment on the pavement, outside the shop, to inhale the warm air, and to enjoy the sense of leisure, at last. Her mind worked mechanically.

"A twist of purple net on dark blue satin, with a tuft of orange feathers. 'Twould be a new combination and vastly genteel. ('Twould suit my Lady Kilcroney too, with her pansy eyes.)"

Some one came up behind her with a quick tread that suddenly faltered. Then a voice called her:

"Pamela!"

"La, Mr. Bellairs, what a start you give me!"

"May I go a little way with you, Pamela dear?"

"There now! If that isn't a gentleman all over, and me having only just re-established my character!

A-waiting for me again outside Madame Mirabel's, with goodness gracious knows how many cats' eyes a-spying on me from behind the shutters ! "

Something about the girl's gay courage, her sane, bright outlook on life, touched him at a spot already exceedingly vulnerable. Anyone else, he thought, would be having the vapours over this afternoon's work ; reproaching, weeping, lost in self-pity and recrimination. He reflected, too, how it might have been, had she listened to him one winter's evening, and one summer's day. A girl in a thousand ! His mind had been already made up, but he ratified the inner decision with an ardent leap of the heart.

They went on side by side, till they reached the Park, and then she remembered again, how, a few yards away, nearly two years ago, she had snatched a pistol from him. He stopped her, and spoke.

" Pamela, I asked you to give me your hand to-day. I ask you again to be my wife. Oh, when I saw you stand with the little dark child in your arms, which they thought was ours, I vowed you were the one woman in the world for me ! Oh, I have been a base wretch ! I owe you money, I owe you my honour. I owe you my life. I owe you something more worth than all these ; the only real, the only pure love I have ever known. Pamela ! You'll make a man of me yet, if you'll have me."

She had once been shaken, flattered by his attentions ; had looked up at him as a being, splendid, dashing, gallant, altogether out of her sphere. When he had courted her, it was as if a god had stooped. But this evening he was something quite different to her : a weak, wild youth whom her love might steady ; a spendthrift, a gambler, an amiable prodigal for whom she might prepare the fatted calf, whom her ring might bind to home ; one, in fine, who had need of her. It was the mother in her who smiled on him now with wet eyes.

Under a high moon, and a sky full of stars they

presently discussed plans that seemed to Pamela to combine the bliss of Eden with the practicality of a work-a-day world.

"I'll not give up my business, sir! I'll never pretend to be other than I am. No false lady airs for me!"

"You wouldn't be Pamela if there were. You shall do exactly what you like! But I'm going to work too. Indeed, my dearest girl, I will! And we'll have that cottage somewhere in the green, not too far but what you can get the coach of a morning."

"Oh," cried Pamela, clasping her hands and laughing. "I'll have roses in the garden, and sit out of a Sunday in a pink muslin dress with flounces!"

CHAPTER XIII

In which my Lady Kilcroney makes an Indelicate Fuss

My Lord Kilcroney had none of your nasty prudish minds that think harm of a kiss. To salute a rosy cheek, or clasp a trim waist came as natural to him as to toss off a tankard of brown ale, or light his long clay, or sit in the sunshine. And indeed, my Lady, knowing him, had as a rule an indulgence for such peccadilloes; the merest shrug of the shoulders or a "Fie for shame, my Lord!" in a voice scarce more indignant than that in which she chid the littler Denis for putting his fingers in the sugar bowl. But the mischief was in it, this summer at Weymouth, Kitty being in attendance on her Royals, that such a change should come over the whole spirit of the whilom sensible spouse.

Such a hullabaloo over a kiss! If ever there was anything likely to drive a really faithful husband to desperate courses, it was this unexpected, undeserved, severity.

Unfortunately he had been unlucky in his choice of partner for the peccadillo. Molly Lafone's smooth cheek, fine grained as a geranium leaf, and as delicately rouged as a miniature, Molly Lafone's cheek, ethereally tinted, had the quality of pitch in the eyes of the other ladies, and the touch of it defiled.

My Lord, puffing at his clay in the County Club at Weymouth, with an air half humorous, half defiant, and thinking back on that same cheek with a certain complacence, might perhaps have altered his opinion on the

whole matter had he been aware how neatly Mrs. Lafone had timed the episode for the passage of the Queen's equipage.

They had met, quite accidentally, on the parade.

"Oh, my Lord Kilcroney," quoth she. "Is it indeed you?"

Her victim as good-humoured and devil-may-care as you please, brought himself up with a wheel and a flourish.

Molly was clasping her hands. It was her trick to go like a snowdrop in the dawn, when the rest of womanhood flared carnation on the cheek. Her small faintly tinted face was absolutely irradiated.

"Is it indeed you, Denis Kilcroney? I declare 'tis like meeting the sun in a fog to see you! Oh, your kind look, my Lord, and your good smile! This place——" She broke off.

"How now!" said he, gallantly saluting a pearl-like inch of wrist between rumpled glove and race ruffle. "What's wrong with the place, Mrs. Lafone? Troth, and I thought it was the St. James's over again, for every ten steps don't I come across a friend! And this is the best meeting of all," he added, with another bow, another kiss, and a still broader smile, for—deuce take him!—the little thing had been monstrous glad to see him, there was no mistake about that, and he was nothing if not responsive. "And as for the sun," he went on, straightening himself, and gazing down at her rather fatuously. "Isn't the great orb of Royalty shining on Weymouth this minute?"

Now Molly Lafone knew how to play such an one as Denis Kilcroney, as a skilful angler plays a fish. She had hooked him with that glance of innocent joy: now she drove the crochets in more firmly by an air of flutter which would have melted any masculine temperament.

("Oh, I have betrayed myself," her tremor, her shy butterfly glance, her sigh, her shaken laughter proclaimed.)

"Oh, the Royal orb," she murmured. "Oh, my Lord!" Then, "Aye, true, indeed. Oh, as you say!

The orb and sceptre. George——" here a gleam of mischief came like April sunshine to drive the shadows from her pretty, abashed countenance. Her faltering voice took a saucy note. "George and his Dragon," she whispered, tittered, put her finger to her lip. "Oh, the mortal dullness of it! I'm a Parson's daughter, as your Lordship knows, and brought up prodigious proper, but I vow and declare that if anything could make me wish —want to shake off my sense of piety and virtue—what am I saying? Good heavens, my Lord Kilcroney! You are but just arrived; but if Windsor is pompous and dull, Weymouth is—Oh!" she yawned.

Kilcroney was eyeing her, his sides shaking with mirth, but at the words pompous the laughter left his lips, he scratched his chin.

"Well, now that you mention it, my dear," he murmured, "it struck me there was a certain tedium in the air."

"Oh, tedium!" cried Molly, and went off on another yawn.

As she yawned, he reflected. Pompous, she had said. There had distinctly been a shade of pomposity about his Kitty, as, just landed from the coach, he had hurried to embrace her, scarce eighteen hours ago.

"Heavens, Denis, not in full view of the window. The Princesses are fond of an evening walk. And good gracious, my Lord, what a coat to travel in, and the King's gentlemen always point-device! And pray, dear Denis, let me send for the hair-dresser, for if Her Majesty was to see you, such a show, down the parade, and she so set against the Irish, I scarcely know how I could bear myself in her Presence."

This was the welcome Denis had had the day before; and it had somewhat clouded his morning thought. It had taken all the comfort of his recent passage through the hands of a first-class barber, and of as good a tankard of burnt Sherry as ever he had tasted at the County Club, to restore him to the good humour in which Mistress

Lafone had found him. He now thought back upon his grievance, and as is often the case, with an increased sense of injury.

" 'Pon me soul, you're in the right of it ! And what in the world my Lady and the rest of them want to be hanging on the Court for, this way, passes me. Glory be to God, doesn't weariness ooze out of them all ? It's sodden they are with it."

" Weariness," echoed she again. She glanced up at the black-faced clock with the white figures on the church tower across the way. The sea was on the other side of them ; the foam-capped waves tossing and furling and pursuing each other in playful frolic like myriads of lambs on a deep blue field. There was a gay sky to match, and a gay wind, full of an intoxicating tang, and it blew Mistress Lafone's shot green taffety into balloons, and silvery liquifactions, and fluttered her light curls, and set the long amber streamers of her rustic hat flying like pennons. She glanced back from the clock to my Lord's face, and her eyes danced and flickered as if the sea were were in them, and suddenly filled with huge tears.

" 'Tis not the weariness, I mind," she exclaimed with a sob. " 'Tis the cruelty ! "

" Why, you poor little bird," quoth he, tenderly compassionate. " Could anyone be cruel to you ? "

" Oh, indeed, they are, my Lord, and I can't think how I have offended them ! Oh, the slights, the unkindnesses ! And my Lady Kilcroney, your own dear lovely lady, my Lord, what hath she against me. . . . Oh, I do assure you," cried Mrs. Lafone, raising her voice piteously, as the measured trot of royal horses beat upon her ear. " I've cried myself to sleep, night after night. And when I saw your face, ' here's one,' I said to myself, ' who will be a little kind to me ! ' "

The wind—it certainly was a naughty wind, as if it, too, were a rebel against the decorum imposed by the presence of Royalty—came rushing up from the wide ocean and caught Mistress Lafone in a positive whirl, seizing her

with a great beat of invisible pennons as if about to fly away with her.

"Oh! oh!" she cried. Her light figure swayed and seemed to lift. She flung out her arms. What could my Lord do but catch her? And holding her, what could he do, but kiss her? For there were tears on her delicate face which melted him, and sparkles behind them which dared him; and what's a kiss when all is said and done?

The Royal carriage wheeled by them, and Kitty, sitting bolt upright opposite the Queen, had a good view of her erring spouse and his infamous companion for the whole length of the parade. It can scarcely be credited: the culprits, as they gazed back at her, were laughing.

The matrimonial course of the Kilcroneys had been fond, but as anyone who knew my Lady might guess, it had been variegated. She had a quick temper, an impatient spirit, and a detestation of monotony; withal the soundest heart in the world. So that never did couple so often fall out, or so fervently make it up, as they. My Lord, who was of an easy-going temperament, who loved and admired his Kitty in all her moods, rather enjoyed these connubial storms.

"Begad," he would say, "there never was anything to equal a dash of red pepper for making a man enjoy the taste of the wine afterwards."

But now my Lady's wrath took an unpleasant form; one which, in its turn, aroused his resentment. It drove him even to a certain bitterness, as he sat in the bow-window of the County Club, pulling at his long clay. It drove the complacent memory of Molly Lafone's smooth, pert cheek from his mind as with a sting.

"'Pon me word," he said, swinging his leg. "A man would think it was the leper I'd made of myself! Split me, Verney, if me Lady doesn't whisk away her skirts as she crosses me path! And never a word out of her since she first had at me—Bejabers! I'm not like to forget that in a hurry! But it's pinched lips and dropped eyes and turn away with her till I'm crazy."

Squire Day and my Lord Verney gazed with compassion on the sinner, the compassion that is the worst kind of condemnation. Then Squire Day said, a little drily:

"'Tis a pity that the occasion should have been quite so public."

And my Lord Verney, drawing in his turn the clay from his lips, burst out:

"Susan says—My Lady Verney hath it that 'twas Mistress Lafone's very plan, to show you up before their gracious Majesties and shame Kitty."

Kilcroney stared a moment with widening eyes and dropping jaw at the speaker. Then the crimson rose in his handsome dissipated face.

"Ah! God help you!" he exclaimed, "if that isn't the ladies all over. 'Tis the down of the world they have on that poor little creature. And what in the name o' God should she want to be playing such a thrick for? And sure, oughtn't I to know, 'twas the innocentest——" he broke off, for Squire Day's laugh was loud.

"Innocent?" he repeated. "My dear Kil, 'tis you who are as innocent as Adam! But I'm with you on one point. The ladies have treated that little Lafone monstrous cruel. I doubt if they have as much as let her nibble a maccaroon with them since they came down here. And your Kitty has given the lead."

"My Kitty!" exclaimed her spouse in a generous heat. "Why, man, she's picked that same Molly out of a hundred scrapes. Sure, Lafone's no more sense than a child. Why, she owes my Lady——"

"Ah," said Squire Day, quietly, "she's one who pays back with interest."

Kilcroney stared again.

"I'll be hanged if I know what you're driving at, men," he began, but suddenly fell silent with fixed eyes.

His arm-chair was opposite the door, which had now been quietly opened; a fine portly gentleman walked in as if the place belonged to him.

" Tare and 'ounds, lads," cried the Irishman, under his breath. " Here's His Royal Highness!" and sprang to his feet.

The next instant the club-room rang with shouts of mirth.

" By the Holy Father! Stafford! Ned, me boy, I took you for the Prince of Wales. 'Pon me living soul, I did. Oh, Ned, Ned! 'tis the fill of your waistcoat you are, and no mistake."

" His Highness ought to be flattered," said Mr. Stafford, who was not.

Miss Pamela Pounce was deposited at The White Hart, Weymouth, by the midday coach, having slept at Dorchester.

She looked as crisp and modish as one of her own hats, as she tripped along the parade towards my Lady Kilcroney's lodgings, followed by a porter who moved in a perfect grove of bandboxes.

Miss Pounce had travelled to Weymouth with a selection of hats and heads for the tempting of her fashionable clientele. Born business woman as she was, she carried her unerring instinct into every detail, such as that very halt at Dorchester, which enabled her to impress at once by her appetising freshness and her air of not having lost a minute in providing an esteemed customer with the very latest ; " piping hot," as she herself expressed it.

She had no hesitation in the choice of her first patroness. My Lady Kilcroney gave the lead and Madame Mirabel's partner only spoke the truth when she averred that she had rather have my Lady's custom than that of Queen Charlotte and all the Princesses.

Softly signalling to the burthened porter to wait in the hall, Miss Pounce nipped two special bandboxes from his grasp and herself mounted the stairs behind Kitty's black boy. Her Ladyship was in her bedroom. That suited Pamela very well ; in fact she had timed herself to find Kitty in her *négligé*, perfumed from her toilet,

restored by her morning chocolate, just planning the pleasures of the day. Miss Pounce smiled, as bending her ear she caught the sound of feminine voices and laughter within. A discreet play of nails upon the panels remaining unanswered, she gave one authoritative tap and entered.

Kitty, in a cloud of lace, with lavender ribbons, occupied the centre of the apartment; throned in a high winged arm-chair. Her elbows were on the table before her, on which were strewn divers coloured prints and an immense heap of light-hued patterns of silk and satin. On either side of her sat her two special cronies: Lady Anne Day and Lady Flora Dare-Stamer. All three heads were bent together; no conspirators planning the downfall of the Crown, could have seemed more wrapped in mysterious colloquy. Pamela had to "hem" before her presence was noticed. Then the faces were lifted with a start, and Miss Pounce had no reason to complain of the effect of her unexpected appearance.

Kitty clapped her hands.

"What good wind has driven you hither, child, to-day of all days?"

"And I who was thinking," cried Nan Day, "that I hadn't a head to my curls, fit to appear at Kitty's party, for my country slut has packed your rose tulle turban, and the Paris toque, Miss Pounce, I do assure you, as if she was stuffing a goose!"

"As for me," said Lady Flora, "I haven't paid Madame Mirabel's account this goodness knows how long. But there—I think she knows I'm no bad customer after all"—with her fat laugh. "And I'm sure she'll let me have a mode to set off my poor countenance, or I shall be lost indeed, amid so much youth and beauty!"

Miss Pounce put down her bandboxes, to give them admirably differentiated curtsies, and drew in her breath with that sucking sound which meant the excess of enjoyment.

My Lady Kilcroney was about to give an entertain-

ment ; an entertainment before which every other effort of hers should pale. It was to be honoured with the presence of the King and Queen and the Princesses ; that went without saying. But it was to be more distinguished even than this. His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, was expected for three days at Weymouth, on a kind of reconciliation visit to Their Majesties—there had been one of those too frequent ruptures between them—and my Lady's party was the only one which he had signified his pleasure to attend. Never in all her triumphant days had Kitty reached such a triumph. It was no wonder that her eyes sparkled, and her hands trembled, as she turned over patterns, and discussed minuets.

Five violins from the Opera were coming, and the famous lady harpist. Only the select of the select were to be admitted to the sacred circle. The supper was to beat every feast that Kitty's chef, with the assistance of several club friends, had ever before accomplished, and Kitty's costume (carmine brocade powdered with silver rosebuds), was to outshine anything that that leader of fashion had previously donned.

" I declare I was about to post an express to Madame Mirabel to get you down, my dear," said Kitty when the first clatter of conversation had something died away.

Pamela pinched her lips.

" Well, if it isn't Providence ! I've got in that bandbox a head !—a head, I say, my Lady, roses dew-dropped with Strass, and just a twist of silver net illusion—if it ain't Providence ! "

Perhaps Miss Lydia Pounce had assisted Providence in this matter. That admirable abigail had her wits all about her.

The three charming ladies held their breath while the nimble young milliner went down on one knee and began to unfasten the cordings of the larger bandbox. Scarcely had her fingers reached the palpitating stage of tissue paper, when the door was flung violently open, and Lord

Kilcroney marched into the room. He came in with a great swing of coat-tails and stamp of high boots, and it was plain to see, by other tokens—his flaming eye, his dilated nostril, his clenched jaw—that he was in a towering rage.

The ladies fell apart, with the movement of scared birds under the dash of the hawk. Even Kitty cowered in her chair, though only for a second. Before the gathering wrath exploded, she had reared her pretty head in defiance, and was ready to meet him with a temper-flash as stormy as his own.

He flung on the table an open letter—a fragrant, pink sheet it was, with coquettish wafer still attached—and pinning it with his finger, asked in a voice, hoarse and trembling from his efforts to control it: "Is this a forgery, my Lady, or is it a bad joke?"

Kitty glanced down at the scrap of paper, marked with her own delicate caligraphy, in the latest thing in violet inks; then, her hotly-resentful gaze contradicting the ice-cold mockery of her accents: "I marvel, my Lord, that you can find a joke in what is to me so monstrous sad."

"I say it's a bad joke, a blanked, ill-bred, devilish bit of cattiness!"

"Oh, pray, pray!" tittered my Lady on the edge of hysterical fury. "Remember you are not in the bosom of your family, Denis. Here are witnesses——"

"Witnesses, is it? I've nothing to hide, I'd have it called by the town crier. The letter which a wife was not ashamed to send to her husband may be sung up and down the parade, for all I care! Listen to this, Nan Day: you led your husband a pretty dance once upon a time, but split me, you stopped short of public insult! Listen, Lady Flora. All the world knows what a treasure Dare-Stamer has in you and how 'tis the good humour of the world you have with him, and the patience! Here's a message for a wife to write to her husband:

" My dear Denis, Her Majesty has most graciously condoned the dreadful Act of Disrespect by which you made an exhibition of yourself and of another person who shall be nameless, at a moment, when the Horrid Spectacle could not fail to meet her August Glance, in so far as not to withdraw her condescending promise to be present at my Ball to-morrow night. She has, nevertheless, given me to understand with Her own incomparable Tact and Kindness that should you find it convenient to be absent on business on that occasion it would considerably add to the harmony of the evening. I am sure I need only convey this expression of her Royal pleasure to you, that you are not so altogether lost to decency and good feeling as not instantly to take steps to meet it. Pray believe me, my Lord, to remain your attached and dutiful Wife——"

Denis's voice shook and broke with a sound that approached a snarl, on the last words.

" What do you think of that ? What do you think of it ? " he shouted, shaking the letter, first under Lady Flora's, then under Nan Day's nose.

Both ladies looked scared.

" Dear ! dear ! " said Lady Flora, " I'm sure 'tis vastly disagreeable all round, but—well, there, my good soul, wouldn't it help matters if you was just to do as the Queen asks ? La ! she's so prodigious stiff-backed. And who should know it but me ! Didn't I nearly die of being Lady of the Bedchamber for three mortal months. Oh, I'm too fat and soft for Her Majesty, but sure, it'll all blow over, and you so good-natured yourself, and so obliging ! "

" I'm sure," said Nan, stepping up to Kitty, and turning a fierce blue eye on my Lord, " I don't know what you mean about leading my Philip a dance, my Lord Kilcroney. Whatever points of difference there may have been between us, they've been private ones, and my husband, sir, is a gentleman of high principles and good conduct, and if I were not all a wife should be to him,

I should be, indeed, the basest of women ; but were I——" she suddenly began to shake and tremble upon tears—" were I wedded to one who outraged my tenderest feelings, offended my dignity in public, made a mock of the most solemn vows, and—and——" she flung her arms round Kitty and clasped her, sobbing.

Her emotion was contagious. Kitty burst into tears on the spot.

" May you never know what it means, my sweet Nan. May your heart never be broken ! "

The two clung together, sobbing as for a wager, and Lady Flora, whisking out a capable handkerchief, sniffed and begged them, with reddening eyelids, to stop for mercy's sake.

" Don't, Kilcroney ! Don't, Nan ! I'm so soft ! You'll have me off too. I never could bear to see anyone cry."

Even Pamela, kneeling beside her bandbox, flung a gaze of deep reproach upon the sinner. She knew something of the story : her aunt was one who liked to retail a bit of spicy gossip when it came her way.

The weight of this feminine condemnation was too much for the unhappy Denis, but his wrath was unabated.

" Vastly well, my Lady. Vastly well," he cried, thrusting the crumpled note into his pocket. " I'll off with myself, aye, and I'll take this love token with me. I'll not pollute your party, never fear ; but whatever you hear of me, now, remember, you drove me to it."

Denis Kilcroney fulfilled his dark threat by going straight to the confectioner's shop, over which Mrs. Lafone had taken modest lodgings. He found her in company with her brother-in-law, Ned Stafford. That gentleman was lying, as much at his ease as he could in the only arm-chair, which was, however, hard and slippery, being covered with horsehair. His hands were joined by the finger-tips, his eyes were closed. With a resigned lift of eyebrow he was listening to the little lady's shrill and voluble harangue.

Mistress Molly, in a white muslin morning wrapper tied round her slim waist by an azure blue ribbon, with silver fair hair, scarcely powdered, all unbound, save for where a knot of the same blue caught the curls at the nape of her neck, looked perhaps only the more attractive because her eyes and cheeks blazed with anger. And it was, my Lord Kilcroney saw with relief, a dry anger; for his Kitty, playing the victim while exercising such—yes! dash it, the only word was spite!—had added exasperation to his sense of injury.

"Come in, come in, my Lord." Mistress Molly wheeled upon him with a laugh, if Denis could only have recognised the fact, more full of spite than his Lady's utmost petulance. "Pray have you heard what I've been saying? Oh, you needn't blink at me like that, Brother Stafford, I'll say it all over again. I'll say that my Lady Kilcroney is the most jealous cat in the whole of England. She has left me out of her royal ball, has she? I'm not virtuous enough! What, my Lord, you kissed my wrist on the parade—and if I say it was my wrist, Tom Stafford? I ought to know! and Kitty—oh, the virtuous Kitty!—and her old cross Royal thought to see the kind of shocking spectacle your virtuous people are fond of thinking they see. My Lady was always jealous of poor little me! I don't care who hears me. I say—hold your tongue, Tom!—'tis a conspiracy, 'tis a scandal. I'll make Mr. Lafone tell His Royal Highness all about it. I'll go to law on it. There can't be more scandal about me than there will be for being the only one of the ladies at Weymouth left out to-morrow night!"

Mr. Stafford, who had been glinting at Denis between his bored eyelids, now opened them a fraction wider.

"For Heaven's sake, good lad," said he, "get her a ticket."

"Get her one yourself."

"My good Kil, your Lady does not even know that I'm in Weymouth."

" Why then, you've but got to show yourself. You're not her husband," added Kilcroney bitterly.

" Not at all ! " cried Mr. Stafford, with some energy. " It shall never be said that I have set myself to curry favour with Kitty Kilcroney, more especially since 'tis my own sister-in-law that she's treating so uncivil. Nay, Kil, I'll keep out of it. I'm only giving you a bit of advice for your own sake. Get her a ticket. 'Twill save a lot of bother in the end. And I do assure you," as Denis laughed hollowly, " 'Twill have an excellent effect on society generally. There has been far too much fuss about an incident which should have been—ahem !—passed over ! "

Lord Kilcroney dropped upon the horsehair sofa, which creaked dismally.

" And pray," said he, in a tone of sarcasm, " when you had dealings with my Lady yourself—and you had a few, one way and another—did you find her so easy to manage ? "

Now Mr. Stafford had somewhere hidden away an old grudge against Lady Kilcroney, who had not only jilted him, but had scored off him notably on more than one occasion. Mr. Stafford was far from approving of Molly, whom, indeed, it may be said, he heartily disliked, but to find a close relative pilloried on your arrival at a fashionable watering-place was a set down to a beau's pride. He was inclined to champion her. Under his languid airs he was very wroth with my Lady Kilcroney ; she was making an indelicate fuss ; she had lost her usual tactful grasp of the situation through ridiculous jealousy. After all, as Kilcroney himself represented, there couldn't have been much harm in a kiss bestowed on the open parade in a high wind ; between wrist or cheek like enough there was a confusion by one or other of the parties. But Kilcroney's next remark made him jump to his feet.

" As for a ticket for the show, me lad, I'm not to have one, either."

" Kil ! "

"My Lord!"

Molly broke into shriller laughter, and beat her palms together.

"And His Royal Highness coming and all!"

"Aye, and by the same token I saw that august personage driving his curricle along the sea road on my way here," said Mr. Stafford, relapsing into his usual rather insolent serenity. Your fine gentleman will not let himself be betrayed into emotion if he can help it. "And I was less flattered than ever at your taking me for him yesterday, Kil."

His sister-in-law looked at him curiously. "But my Lord Kilcroney is right!" she cried maliciously. "Since you've grown so prodigious fat, brother-in-law."

Then, having planted the pin-prick which she never allowed to escape her, she returned to the real subject of interest.

"Not to be present at your own wife's entertainment? Oh come, my Lord, this is an Irish way of evading the question. You must think us monstrous simple to credit——"

It was a morning of interruptions, for here Miss Pounce and the bandboxes marched unexpectedly in upon them. She was breathing quickly and speaking with volubility.

My Lady Verney's own woman had informed her of Mrs. Lafone's address in the town, and she had ventured to present herself with the very latest, positively the very latest, to show to her most esteemed customers. Miss Pounce was quite sure that Mistress Lafone and Mistress Stafford—"Is your lady here, sir?" she curtsied to the Beau, who was ogling her jocosely. "Not till next week? Oh, dear, what a pity! I'd have been honoured, sir, to supply a hat or a head for the beautiful Mrs. Stafford. But as I was saying, I am quite sure that you, Madam, and your sister, being such kind patrons of the establishment, Madame Mirabel would have taken it very bad of me, very bad of me indeed, had I failed to seek you out."

Denis Kilcroney was sitting erect upon the sofa, with

his arms folded, and a stern glance upon the glib Pamela. This young person avoided meeting the glance in question. She felt that her swift appearance at Mrs. Lafone's lodgings on the heels of my Lord's stormy exit was, for all her clever patter, a little too obvious a coincidence.

"I've a head here," went on Miss Pounce, beginning to set down her bandboxes, and making the most theatrical effects with the undoing of strings and rustling of tissue paper. "Well, *really*, the Duchess of Hampshire wanted, right or wrong, to have it for her ball last week when she entertained the Prince, as you may have seen by the news-sheet, Madam. But I says to her, 'No, your Grace,' I says, 'tis too elfin for your Grace. Your Grace wants, so to speak, the Goddess effect.' And as I says it, if you'll believe me, I thought of you, ma'am."

Mrs. Lafone did not believe her, but she stood, hesitating a little, over the bandboxes, torn between a pettish desire to dismiss with obloquy the wretch who had come to turn the dagger in the wound, and the budding hope that Mr. Stafford, who had plenty of money, might be moved to do the generous for once, and present his injured sister-in-law with a token of his esteem.

Miss Pounce drew out what was indeed a fairy-like wreath of pale blue convolvulus, and Molly exclaimed in rapture. In a wink Miss Pounce had placed it on the fair, dishevelled head.

"Oh, Madam, if ever there was a perfect vision! Look, Mr. Stafford, Sir! Look, my Lord, if I may make so bold; isn't Mrs. Lafone fitted, so to speak, like a—like a——" She faltered on the simile, for neither gentlemen showed any disposition to rise to the occasion.

My Lord cast another glance upon the milliner, which said as plain as words: "Don't think you can take me in, my good girl," and then, with a formal bow to the siren and a wave of the hand to Stafford, he sauntered out of the room.

Mr. Stafford flung a glance of mocking pity after him, whistling a ballad tune under his breath; then he put his

hand into his pocket, but it was only to produce a snuff-box, from which he proceeded to inhale.

Molly pettishly tore the wreath from her curls, declaring in her most acrid accents :

" Really, Miss Pounce, this is a great liberty. I can order my hats for myself when I require them, and then I usually write to Madame Eglantine, in Paris. And anyhow, I am not going into society by doctor's orders. I am here for my health. Pray, Mr. Stafford, will you pull the bell rope, that Madame Mirabel's assistant may be shown to the door."

Miss Pounce started to re-pack the wreath, with further extraordinary manipulations of tissue paper. She was all bland apology. She craved a hundred pardons. She had made so sure that Mrs. Lafone would be going to my Lady Kilcroney's ball at the Assembly Rooms to-morrow night. She hoped and trusted it would be as great a success as the Duchess of Hampshire's last week, and that His Royal Highness would be equally delighted with his entertainment. " Though of course——" here the milliner genteely tittered, " it was not likely he would be equally demonstrative to his hostess. Was it possible Madame had not heard how His Royal Highness, saying ' It is a Sovereign's privilege to salute another Sovereign, and you are Queen of Beauty,' had kissed her Grace of Hampshire on the cheek after the minuet—Oh, indeed, she had danced like an angel, and looked exceedingly well—before the whole assembly ? "

" Dear me ! " said Mr. Stafford, with humorous meaning.

" And I'm sure, I hope," cried acrid Molly, " that His Royal Highness may be as prodigal of caress to my Lady Kilcroney. Oh ! " she cried, clasping her hands, " if that is the kind of fit that's on him, and he was to kiss my sweetest Kitty before his Royal Mamma and the lovely Princesses, what a monstrous joke it would be."

Here Mr. Stafford stepped forward and opened the door.

" Allow me, my dear," said he, and with what Pamela

thought an insufferable free-and-easiness, lifted her band-boxes one after the other into the passage, and literally bowed her out.

She stood, snapping her fingers and biting her nails, to linger and listen as long as she dared. Up to this she had after all but poor gleanings to bring back to her Aunt Lydia for the retailing into her patroness's ear, save, indeed, the sad verification of my Lord's presence in the Minx's lodgings. But she saw that she was suspected by one, if not both, of the gentlemen, and however necessary it is for a young milliner to make quite certain that the cords of her boxes are properly tied, it is not an operation that can be prolonged indefinitely. Some phrases she did catch.

"The joke of it is that the Prince," Mr. Stafford was observing.

The rest of the remark was lost; it was followed by a crow from Molly Lafone.

"Not to be there, after all? Serve her right!" Then in another tone. "Oh, I have the drollest inspiration!"

"Hush!"

Pounce pricked her ear to its utmost alertness.

"I have the drollest inspiration," said Mrs. Lafone. "Since you say, Tom, you're poz that His Royal Highness don't mean to attend my Lady's ball—and I say it serves her right—why should you not go in his stead?"

"Go in his stead?" Mr. Stafford blankly repeated then. "You're crazy, Molly!"

"And not at all! Oh, it can be managed, I do assure you! Oh, it would be too droll, too delightful! And it would be better than droll, for 'twould be a certain way to heal the breach, the sad, sad breach between our poor Kil and that same jealous Kitty. Pray, Brother-in-law, before you interrupt, let me speak one word! Kitty's Royals, King, Queen and Princesses, will but pass through the Assembly Rooms. 'Tis the way of Royalty. 'Tis all anyone would expect of them, more especially as His

Majesty is so out of health. What is to prevent the Prince changing his mind, and popping in for late supper? By the Prince, I mean you, Tom. Come now, you know 'tis a thing he might do very well. People would only say he could not bear the tedium of dancing at his Royal parents' heels. Come now, Mr. Stafford, sir. I see it in your eye. You know 'tis a trick could be played on my Lady with perfect success? Oh, you need not present yourself on the scene till every one should have departed, save the select little circle, those sweet, dear, charming ladies and their stupid husbands, who won't have anything to say to poor little me! And then, oh, Mr. Stafford, you must be monstrous charmed, and monstrous gallant, and—well, monstrous tipsy if you like, and you will but the closer ape our dear future Sovereign! And then (oh, how you gape!) don't you see? You must kiss my Lady, and if she don't have to forgive my Lord afterwards——"

"Foh!" said Mr. Stafford. "'Tis the rankest nonsense. And I'm not so prodigious like the Prince as all that."

"Oh, but you are, Mr. Stafford! Didn't my Lord Kilcroney take you for him but yesterday? With one of those new white chokers, and a frill to the shirt, and a bit of blue ribbon across it and a new wig with a top-knot to it, and a fine brocade waistcoat on your fine figure—you were always so clever at the acting, Brother-in-law! —I'd defy even your Prue to find you out!"

Mr. Stafford was apparently unconvinced, for Molly Lafone's accents changed from wheedling to taunting.

"And indeed, Tom, I thought you'd more spirit. Here I give you such a chance as never was of paying my Lady out for the trick she played on you. Why, she made you the laughing stock of Bath. Oh, I have heard such droll tales—how, rather than marry you, she made my Lord—Denis O'Hara, as he was then—dress up as a woman and pretend to be your previous wife at the altar steps. Are you so mean-spirited as to forget? And 'tisn't as if it wouldn't be the best turn in the world for my Lord, and

him so good-natured, and treated so shameful! I thought gentlemen stood by each other. For a wife to insult her husband so!"

"It mightn't put me in such very good odour with His Royal Highness," said Mr. Stafford, and Pamela knew by his tone that he was faltering.

"As if anyone was likely to tell him. However, if you're afraid, Brother-in law——"

"You're a little devil," said Mr. Stafford.

And Pamela picked up her boxes and flew. She had heard enough, and she knew that Mistress Lafone had carried her point.

CHAPTER XIV

In which Kitty is more Incomparable Than Ever

"Good God!" said Nan Day, under her breath. "If that is not the Lafone piece! My dearest Kitty, what insolence!"

"I invited her," said my Lady Kilcroney, quietly.

"Kitty!"

"By special messenger to-day."

"Kitty!!!"

"I particularly wished for the presence of Mrs. Lafone here to-night."

The syren was now approaching, crowned with the very wreath she had cast back at Pamela Pounce, writhing like a lissome snake, in the billows and laces of her changing sea-green ball gown. Nan watched Kitty's urbanity, and the minx's unconcealed impertinence with ever-growing amazement.

"Am I too late to see the dear, dear Royals?"

"Unfortunately their Majesties stayed but a short time. The King was feeling unwell."

"Oh, my dearest Lady Kilcroney, what a disappointment for you!"

Kitty had a tilting smile.

"Less to me than to other people, perhaps, my dear Lafone, since I have the privilege of being so constantly in Their Majesties' company."

"True, true. It must be a sad fatigue for you. Her Majesty has no mercy on her ladies' legs, I always heard." The minx's eyes were wandering. "But His Royal

Highness has remained, I trust? 'Twas the talk of the place how he was expected."

"His Royal Highness has left Weymouth, I understand."

Kitty was really too unconcerned. It could take in nobody, Lady Anne Day thought. She bit into a rose of her bouquet, and wished she could beat Lafone about the head with it.

"Oh, my dearest Lady Kilcroney, who could have told you such a tale? His Royal Highness is even now sitting at the window of the County Club, eating lobster by the light of a silver candelabra. I saw him as my chair was carried by. Surely he will present himself at supper time? The Prince is always so courteous, so considerate."

"Pray, Mrs. Lafone, the quadrille is beginning. Have you a partner? Or shall I provide you with a gentleman?"

Molly rolled her glistening green eyes with well-feigned anxiety from side to side.

"Well, there's an old promise to my Lord Kilcroney. He made me swear to give him the first dance at the next assembly, wherever we might happen to meet. Ah—is he not yonder? Nay, 'tis quite another countenance. But he will be at your Ladyship's side in a moment, I make no doubt."

"My Lord has left Weymouth."

"Oh, my dearest Lady Kilcroney, what a sad, strange contretemps!"

Even as she spoke that green eye became fixed. One of Kitty's magnificent footmen was approaching, bearing a letter on a salver. My Lady read it, glanced at Mrs. Lafone, and then turned to Lady Ann: "The Prince is coming, after all, Nan. How strange—" she turned back to Molly—"that you should this moment have suggested the possibility."

Mistress Lafone had recognised in a single flash the great folded sheet that she had herself prepared and

sealed with so much amusement, to the accompaniment of the protests of the rather doubtful, yet not altogether unwilling Beau. The seal had been Molly's triumph. What will not a determined woman accomplish? She had actually got possession of the kind of wafer habitually used by the Prince. Like mistress, like maid, it is said: Mistress Molly's own maid was as much of a minx as her mistress. She had started flirtations with every likely scoundrel about Weymouth before she had been a fortnight in the place. One of the drawers at the Crown Inn had thought it a small price to pay for the smiles of Jenny Jinks to give her, as a keepsake, a few wafers out of the Prince's own ivory box, off the writing table in the room occupied by His Royal Highness.

"The Prince coming after all!" cried Nan Day joyfully. She was genuinely fond of Kitty, but even if she had not been so, to see Lafone discomfited would have been delightful to her.

This latter was seized with a fit of tittering, and was fain to retire, fanning herself violently and simulating a threat of the vapours.

Lady Ann looked after her contemptuously.

"She can hardly conceal her spite," quoth she. "Ah, Kitty, I believe you knew the Prince was coming all the while, and that was why you invited that little rascal!"

Kitty had upon this, as even the obtuse Nan could not but notice, a singular smile.

Certainly it would have been a thousand pities had my Lady Kilcroney's entertainment fallen flat, for never had even her bright wits and long purse made more charming and sumptuous preparations.

The Assembly Rooms had been transmogrified into a fairy bower, with hangings of white silk, and garlands of roses. The band was surpassing itself: the supper, no doubt, would be unsurpassable. There was a special supper-room prepared off the great ball-room, where, it was hinted, such delicacies would be served as would tickle the jaded palate of the Prince. If he had not come

'twould have been a catastrophe. Yes, positively a catastrophe for my Lady Kilcroney.

The moment approached for the appearance of the Royal guest. The most pompous of the company had taken its departure closely upon the heels of Royalty, and now there was left none but that select circle to which Mistress Lafone had referred with so much acrimony, and a sprinkling of young naval officers, quite negligible beings.

Nevertheless, one of these was now to suit Mistress Molly's purpose very well. Most unaccountably, she, who was generally surrounded by the male sex, found herself neglected to-night by the gentlemen of Kitty's coterie. Perhaps her mermaid charms seemed more dangerous than alluring after the trap into which my Lord Kilcroney had fallen. Anyway, she was glad to hang upon the arm of a blushing youth in blue, and the celebrated band striking up "God save the Prince of Wales" with a great stroke of bows, planted herself with her cavalier near the entrance to watch, her heart beating high with ecstasy and fear—for the appearance of brother-in-law Tom as the Prince of Wales.

A stout gentleman, in the very pink of the fashion, with all his double chins majestically sunk in swathes of fine cambric, with ruffles, blue ribbon and a star, with calves that must have made Kitty's footmen green with envy, and shoulders that would have been remarkable in a guardsman, advanced, stepping with the inimitable carriage of the great.

Again an hysterical burst of laughter rose in Molly's throat. The next moment she pinched the arm of the young naval gentleman so fiercely that he turned in alarm.

"What is the matter?"

"I am swooning!" said Molly with a gasp, and swoon she did, and no mistake about it!

However cunningly Mr. Stafford might make himself up, however paint and pad and be-wig himself, strut and

look majestic, he could not have given to his handsome brown eyes the dull protruding stare, nor to his features that thickness which a plethoric habit was inducing in the heir to the throne; and Mr. Stafford would not have been escorted by the gentlemen of the Prince's own suite; and, most certain of all, he would not have had my Lord Kilcroney by his side.

The dreadful discovery flashed upon the unfortunate Molly with the still more appalling realisation that the next few minutes must inevitably see the bogus Prince present himself on the heels of the genuine one; and that all would be discovered, to the everlasting undoing of those concerned.

"Oh, if I have but the time to warn him!" she thought; when Nemesis overtook her in the shape of that real swoon.

"You go on slapping her hands, auntie, while I burn another feather. Dear, to be sure, don't she look bad! Downright silly, I call it, for ladies to be lacing themselves so tight, and she as thin as a fish to begin with! I declare, when I cut those green laces, they regular popped."

As through layers of swirling mist which both blinded and deafened her, Mrs. Lafone vaguely caught these words. Another voice penetrated more sharply to her growing consciousness.

"And if you was to pull yourself in a bit, Pamela, you'd look a deal more genteel. A well-looking girl like you, with all your advantages and gowned, I will say that for you, with uncommon taste, to go about with such a milkmaid figure! I'd drink a tablespoonful of white vinegar night and morning, if I was you. Drat! How green she do keep! Slap a bit harder, child. I'm all of a dither to get into that little balcony that overlooks the supper-room, and see my Lady and His Highness and all."

"A balcony, is there?" Pamela's pleasant accents questioned.

" Yes, my dear, and you can come along with me, once we get the life back into Madam. A minstrels' gallery they call it, overlooking the hall. Oh, I had a peep just now when I ran for the hartshorn. 'Tis the elegantest spectacle you ever saw; to look down on the supper table was like fairyland. Ain't she sighed? She was always an aggravating piece," said the elder Miss Pounce with some asperity.

Molly lay with closed eyes and fully recovered wits. She was debating whether to prolong the fit and let herself be carried back seemingly unconscious to her lodgings, would not be the best way out of an unpleasant dilemma. It would annoy these two impertinent females: that was an added advantage.

" Was they already at table when you looked in on them, auntie? " asked Madame Mirabel's partner, between two brisk smacks of Mrs. Lafone's palm.

" They was, my dear. Well, since there don't seem to be a mite of use trying to get her to swallow anything, I'll have that drop of ratafia myself. It sort of turns me to see people that colour—they was all a-sitting round the supper table, His Highness beside my Lady, and my Lord with Lady Flo, and just the rest of my Lady's intimates. The supper table looking beautiful with the best gold plate. And them red, red roses my Lady paid such a sum for. And the Prince's top-knot shining lovely, and your wreath—'twas the naturallest thing; you could have sworn the dew had just fallen on it! But my Lady Anne's blue turban's a trifle heavy for my taste, Pam. She was a-sitting rather glum, I thought, but perhaps that was because she didn't have her gentleman."

" Her gentleman? "

" My Lady was counting on Mr. Stafford——"

There was a double cry.

" Mr. Stafford! " screamed Pamela and Mrs. Lafone together. Pamela dropped the hand she was slapping with such good will, and Mrs. Lafone sat bolt upright.

" Did you say my Lady was expecting Mr. Stafford? "

asked Pamela. She was in such amazement she could not give a thought to the patient's miraculous recovery.

" Well, and upon my word, and why should not my Lady invite Mr. Stafford ? What's took you ? And as for you, ma'am, if ever I see a lady come out of a swound as you have sudden-like this minute——"

But the invalid interrupted, rising to her feet, clasping her dishevelled head with both hands, and staring from one to the other, as if she or they were mad.

" When was Mr. Stafford invited ? What do you know about his having been expected ? Heavens, woman, answer me ! 'Tis a matter of life and death for me."

" Mercy on us ! Shall you be giving us the screaming vapours next, ma'am ? I happen to know—if you must have it—that my Lady only heard of his presence in Weymouth at seven ot the clock this evening, and nothing would serve her but he must be sent to that instant minute."

" Take me to the balcony you spoke of," said Mrs. Lafone, in an extinct voice.

Her clothes were hanging off her back, as Lydia shockedly pointed out ; and her hair was a sight for the crows ; and my Lady had only given leave for her own woman (though she wouldn't mind Pam) ; Lydia felt sure she wouldn't, so to speak, care about people as isn't asked to the supper party, spying on His Highness in that common kind of way !

But Mrs. Lafone produced a gold piece with so much promptitude that her bodice was pinned together, her mantle brought, and her still tottering steps guided to the upper passage and to the gallery in a remarkably short space of time. The balcony was filled with palms and flowering plants. If anyone had thought of looking up, and chanced to see the narrow, white face and fiery eyes peering down at them, they might have thought some witch had flown in on her broomstick to cast a baleful spell upon the cheerful company.

The two Miss Pounces quite forgot their uncomfortable companion in the thrilling interest of the scene. Lively were the whispers they exchanged across the stem of a stout tree fern.

"La, aunt, if that isn't Mr. Stafford down there, as cool as a cucumber! Well, to be sure; ain't the world a strange place?"

"Cool he always was, as nobody knows better than me. The way he on and off with that poor piece, Madame Eglantine, when she kept a milliner's shop at Bath, and proposing to my Lady all the while, and she the rich widow Bellairs. Well—cucumbers was not in it."

Pamela Pounce was craning eagerly forward. Certainly to see Mr. Stafford *in propria persona* sitting genially in the company of the Prince, the guest of my Lady Kilcroney, after conspiring to humiliate and confound her, was the last development she had expected of the night's drama.

That my Lord Kilcroney should be playing host to the wife who had with contumely dismissed him was another matter, Miss Pamela Pounce was by no means so amazed to see him sitting at the supper table as Mrs. Lafone had been to see him walk in.

"The little cat," thought Pam, "'twas a real fit, sure enough, and serve her right. She ain't succeeded this time—though she came near enough to it—in separating the elegantest couple in all society. What a good thing it is, Pam my girl," (she was fond of apostrophising herself thus) that you ain't too squeamish to do a bit of spying in season and listen outside doors."

"His Royal Highness is taking a glass of wine with Mr. Stafford," whispered Lydia sibilantly, in a prodigious state of excitement.

Pamela felt an abrupt movement beside her, and glancing round, beheld Mrs. Lafone darting from the gallery like a snake disturbed. The girl drew a long breath. The air was easier to her lungs now that this miasma of malice was removed from it.

His Royal Highness was most agreeably and flatteringly inebriated at the end of Kitty's supper party. He declared thickly that it had been a most delightful evening. If he did not salute her cheek with his royal lips as he had saluted the Duchess of Hampshire, he mumbled her hand with repeated kisses. But Kitty's triumph was not yet complete. Its culminating point was only reached when she found herself with my Lord back in the withdrawing-room of her lodgings, accompanied on her express invitation, by Mr. Stafford.

She flung off her wraps and, standing in the middle of the room, with rather a tearful smile, held out a hand to each.

"Denis, my love—Stafford, my old friend—we have, each of us, I dare say, things against each other to forgive and forget, but for my part 'tis all done with already."

"Ah, my Lady Kilcroney. Ah, Kitty!" cried the Beau, moved out of his wont, and pressing the little hand against his breast, before lifting it to his lips, "When I received your note warning me of the ass I would be making of myself in trying to get the better of you, I thought—dash me, I thought—there's not a woman in the world to compare to her for generosity and wit! And how, in the name of God, did you know, Kitty?" he cried, with a change of tone. "'Pon my soul, never tell me that piece, Molly, betrayed me for an invitation?"

"By no means, sir, the invitation was sent to her—well! as a little punishment. She came all agog to see my discomfiture, and Lydia, my woman, tells me she was so overset at the sight of His Highness that she swooned."

My Lord by this time had an arm about his wife's waist.

"'Twas I told me wife," said he in his richest brogue, "of your dastardly plot, me fine fellow."

"You?"

"Ay, meself and no other."

"But this is mystery upon mystery," said Mr. Stafford, and he was really mystified.

"A little bird told me," said Kilcroney, wagging his head.

Kitty interrupted, laughing.

"Aye, and by the way, my Lord, ring the bell and send Pompey for that very little bird. She must not go unrewarded."

"She?" repeated Mr. Stafford. His eyebrows went up. He was perhaps not altogether amazed to see Pamela Pounce walk into the room.

"Come here, child," said my Lady, and picked from her bodice a pretty, sparkling brooch. "Wear this for my sake in remembrance of to-night. As for me," her light voice deepened, "I shall never forget your good sense and courage. She guessed you were planning some mischief with your charming sister-in-law, Mr. Stafford, sir, and having to tie her bandboxes outside the door, she caught some whispers of your little game."

"Oho!" said Mr. Stafford.

"I listened," cried Pamela with flaming cheeks, "and I went straight to my Lord here and my Lord——"

Here my Lord himself took up the tale, his lazy, pleasant voice creaming forth in contrast to the excited tones of the young milliner.

"And faith, bad husband as I am—troth, sure it's the worst in the world—there was but one thing for me to do, and that was to protect me wife. So I went to His Royal Highness and did a little bit of coaxing—not that he needed much. God bless him, isn't he always ready to condescend to be entertained? And I got him to promise easy enough to come in to supper after his royal parents had gone to bed. And then I wrote a line to my Lady and asked her permission to bring the Prince, and by the same token I told her about your fine scheme of counterfeit. Sure, I knew my Lady could be trusted to deal with that."

"Denis," said Kitty. "There was an infamous note I sent you on pink paper. Have you got it about you?"

He gave her a grim look, inserted two fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and drew it forth.

" Give it back to me, my dear love."

" Why, I was thinking 'twouldn't be a bad token for me to keep about me, lest I should be meeting some sorrowful young creature that wanted comforting on a parade——"

" Oh, my Lord, don't mock me."

She twitched it from his hand and began to tear it into a hundred shreds. Then, between laughing and crying, she gathered in her turn a little note from her bosom.

" 'Tis you that are generous, 'tis you that are forgiving, my Lord. How could I keep up petty malice, Mr. Stafford when my Denis had treated me so gallant ? This letter," cried Kitty, kissing it, " shall be my treasure till I die."

CHAPTER XV

In which the Mad Brat takes the Bit between Her Teeth, but Miss Pamela Pounce Keeps Hold of the Reins

The first stage between Weymouth and London brought Miss Pamela Pounce to Blandford where she intended to pass the night. She had spent an agreeable and lucrative week at Weymouth, whither the presence of Royalty had brought a host of fashionables, and where it had been easy for her to dispose of all the modish hats and heads, caps and toques which she had selected to tempt holiday appetites.

With a light conscience and heavy pockets, therefore, Pamela was setting off for London in finest spirits. She had brought more than her usual zest to this journey who always enjoyed travelling to the full; the movement, the change of scene, the bustle at arrival and departure, the choice of the night's lodging, the chance adventure, the shifting company, all stimulated, interested, delighted her. She could take care of herself, and had no fear, either of the rare highwayman, or of the intrusive gallant.

The " Rover " deposited its burden with a fine flourish of horn and whip and clatter of hoofs, tick on time, in the cobbled courtyard of the Crown Inn at Blandford.

Six of the clock had just been huskily beaten out behind the great white dial that surmounted the celebrated stables. The jolly coachman turned half round in his seat, and winked at the gentleman in the many-caped roquelaure who had entertained him with such

racy gossip for five hours that day, and who had not failed moreover, to season their conversation with a brimmer at every halting place.

"What do you think o' that for punctuality, my Lord?"

Now "my Lord" was a mere fluke—shot at quality, but for once it had hit the bull's eye.

The traveller, descending with care from the coach (for the last tankard had been tightly laced and required some carrying) was nearly run into by a brisk young lady in a grey riding coat, and black satin hat, who exclaimed genteelly: "To be sure, sir, I crave your pardon!" And then cried: "My Lord Kilcroney, is it indeed you!"

"Why, 'tis never Miss Pounce!" exclaimed my Lord, surveying her, as if the last thing wanting to his joviality had now been granted him by Fate. And, indeed, not only was Pamela Pounce vastly pleasing to look upon—she had something of the firmness, the clear red-and-white and the general appetising appearance of a white-heart cherry—but she was vastly agreeable company too, as he had found out on more than one occasion. Added to which, she had recently done him a very good turn with his lady, as sometimes comes in the way of milliners and such like who collect back-door gossip, and exercise back-door influence. Withal, which certainly spoilt nothing, she was a young person of merit; virtuous, responsible, and discreet. My Lord knew that she would take at their proper value any little compliment or other expression of esteem, such as the squeeze of a trim waist, an absent-minded clasp of taper fingers, even a snatched kiss. He might get a box on the ear; he would never be treated either to outraged sensibility, or—still more inconvenient contingency—an undesired responsiveness.

He held Miss Pounce's hand, and smiled down into her bright face with something approaching enthusiasm.

"Split me, my dear, but this is a piece of good luck. And I who thought I'd be all at my lonesome over——"

he stopped, and sniffed. "What is it?—the beef-steak pudding, and the roast capons to-night. I invite you to supper with me, Pamela. I sent my rascal ahead to bespeak the little oak parlour on the garden, and——"

"Thanking you kindly, my Lord," said Miss Pounce, disengaging her hand, and speaking with great firmness, "I dine with no gentleman in the back parlour."

His merry face fell.

"How now, so prudish?"

"Nay, my Lord, merely prudent. 'Tis as much as my reputation is worth. The ladies wouldn't like it. No, nor the landladies. The common room is best for a common working girl like me."

"My dear," said Lord Kilcroney, "'tis an uncommon girl you are. You're in the right of it a thousand times. Faith, my Lady would be ready to tear the wig from my head if she heard of it!"

"And she'd tear my hats from hers, and that would be vastly the greater calamity of the two, forgive me for saying so, my Lord."

"See here," said he, "I'll face the bagmen for the pleasure of your conversation, for, odd's my life, you've a sparkle about you that's as good as champagne after the dreary road! I'll tell them to lay your place beside mine in the coffee-room, and you'll season my supper to me with that spicy tongue of yours."

Pamela said she was a poor girl, and she hoped she knew her place, that my Lord was vastly condescending, and that she'd have to take what seat was given her; which remarks, my Lord, rightly understanding to be an oblique acceptance, greeted with laughter and applause, and went gaily towards the inn after her, admiring her generous, well-knit shape, and taking off his hat with a mock flourish as she modestly stood back to let him enter first.

The summer evening was warm, and the odours of viands potent in the coffee-room. The tables were crowded; there was an immense buzz of voices, and

clatter of knives and forks, and a running to and fro of aproned drawers, and sturdy bare-armed wenches.

Pamela stood at the door, and looked in discontentedly. She was as little squeamish as any healthy young woman of her class ; she left " vapours " and " qualms " to her betters. But the long day had tired her, and there was my Lord, with his wig askew, and a couple of bottles before him, and an air of having already done some justice to them. It was all very well to have chosen the propriety of the public room, but it might have its drawbacks. A poor girl never knew what spiteful eyes might be watching. It would do her no good if some loose tongue were to start a bit of scandal about her: " Miss Pamela Pounce behaving shameful with my Lord Kilcroney, as brazen as you like, before everybody." It would always be, of course, the poor girl who behaved shameful, never the half-tipsy nobleman. Such is the way of the world.

" And as like as not," went on Pamela to herself—she had a vivid and swift imagination—" the next thing will be : ' They left Weymouth together. 'Twas a regular elopement.' No, thank you, Pamela, my girl. It ain't good enough for us to sit next to my Lord in his cups, and eat beef-steak pudding—a dish I never was partial to—on a hot night—and lose my character to boot."

She whisked round and out through the luggage-piled hall into the yard, where, by the gate which gave upon the river meadow, she had marked a bench erected round an old tree stump.

" I'll sit here," resolved Miss Pounce, suiting the action to the thought. " And, by and by, when those creatures have done gorging within, I'll have a little supper by my own. Lord, how vastly more pleasant it is out here ! "

She drew a long breath, inhaling the air, sweet with the near fragrance of honeysuckle, and distant scents of ripe corn. She clasped her hands on her knees—those busy, clever hands which so seldom rested—and gazed

dreamily out upon the scene. It made a pleasant picture; the red-tiled roof of the stables was beginning to glow in the warm evening light; the irregular outline of the old inn, already in shadow, was cut darkly against the limpid blue of the sky; white and grey pigeons flitted lazily hither and thither. From within the open stable doors came peaceful sounds of munching jaws, rattling chains, and now and again a stamping hoof. A fat tortoiseshell cat sat licking herself on a window sill. There was not a human creature in sight for the moment, and Miss Pounce felt quite poetic.

But she was not destined to be indulged long in her rare mood for solitude. There came a clatter of hoofs, a hum of wheels along the dusty road. A high curricle swung into the yard, at the raking trot of a tall chestnut driven by a reckless hand. It was drawn up with a splash of protesting hoofs; and Pamela, suddenly pricked to interest, beheld, springing unaided from the high perch, the young lady whose erratic conduct had earned for her the sobriquet of "the Mad Brat," Lady Selina, who had scandalised society, outraged her Royal patrons, alienated her friends, and positively stupefied her family a bare three months ago by eloping, from the very back of the Princess's chair at the Opera, with a penniless insignificant officer of Marines of the name of Simpson. Lady Selina Simpson's further career, though necessarily passed in comparative obscurity, had done little to lessen the aptness of the sobriquet. Much the contrary, indeed, and—Lieutenant Simpson being stationed at Weymouth—Lady Selina had had an unexpected opportunity for a display of eccentricity, which made both her elder sisters agree for once that something must be done to put a stop to Selina's goings on—"under the very nose of the Royals, my dear; she does it on purpose to discredit us,"—even if something entailed the purchase for Lieutenant Simpson of some post pleasantly remote in the Indies.

Here, then, was the Mad Brat, as naughty and modish

as you please (Miss Pamela's professional eye was quick to notice); wrapped to the ears in a military looking cloak of elegant blue, and hatted with as smart a little beaver, also of military cock, as she, Pamela, had ever seen—and that was saying a great deal.

My young Lady Selina's curls were scarcely powdered, and shone very golden under the evening light, set in flying bunches each side of her narrow, pretty, pale, impertinent face. There was something in the expression of her countenance, attractive for all its wilfulness, that made Pamela's quick wits jump to the horrid conclusion —before even she had clapped eyes on the driver of the curricle.

"Lord! if ever I see the look of one bent on a desperate course, I see it this minute!" thought the milliner, turning the glance on Lady Selina's companion.

And there it was for you. That black-avised gentleman, with the bushy black eyebrows, and the small, restless black eyes beneath, with the blue chin and full, insolent mouth—that was never young Simpson! "Some elderly rip, out of the poor lad's regiment!" diagnosed Pamela rapidly, seeing the gold-lace glint. "And that is why my young Madam is so monstrous military herself. If ever I see an elopement——!"

And indeed, the two had a flushed and conscious air; defiant, suspicious.

"However you may try to brazen it out, your heart's as heavy as lead, you poor silly thing," was the next conclusion of the watcher. "As for you, you wicked wretch, you are all ardours and whispers, all swollen with triumph, yet you aren't a bit sure of her. There, now, I knew it—she won't let you lead her in, with your arm about her waist; not even let you take her hand. She's no notion to have you blazon her your conquest, for all the Inn company to see. Mercy on us, there's a toss of the head! Aye, and here's a look for you, my fine gentleman! No—I wouldn't make too sure of her yet, if I were you!"

The sound of hoofs and wheels, and of the clanging bell had brought landlord and landlady to the doorway. Pamela emerged slowly from her leafy retreat. She had a mind to keep the Mad Brat under observation as long as she could.

'Twas a mere child! Pamela knew that she could scarce have reached her twentieth year; and Pamela had once herself been mighty near flinging away everything a woman should hold dear, for a man's smile. She had been saved, on the very edge of the precipice, by a sort of miracle. And she often had shuddered, contemplating the horrible depth of the chasm into which she had all but fallen. Did she not now read on the young wife's face something of the frantic recklessness that had once moved her?

Besides which she had a pride in her sex which made it personally grievous to her when a woman went wrong. And lastly, she flattered herself she was a judge of character, and yonder military buck was a bad, dissipated, selfish wretch, with no use for a woman but to break her heart.

As she entered the hall, discreetly, in the wake of the new-comers, she found Lady Selina in high wrangle with her swain.

"And I say, I will have a post-chaise, Colonel Endacott! And I protest you're making a vast mistake! Pray, Mr. Landlord, a bowl of broth and a glass of wine in a private parlour—and a post-chaise, with a decent pair of horses, in an hour. The gentleman will go to the coffee-room. Yes, sir—you will go to the coffee-room. Do I hear you curse, sir? La! here is a charming thing, indeed!"

Suddenly her eye became fixed; she uttered an exclamation in a high tone of surprise and excitement.

"Sir Jasper Standish—as I am a living woman!"

Pamela then perceived, standing in the doorway of the coffee-room chewing a gold toothpick, no less a personage than that dashing widower. He was surveying his

whilom betrothed and her illicit cavalier with a bantering, swaggering, insolent air in which there was more than a glint of jealous anger.

As Lady Selina hailed him, he tripped forward. "Good heavens," reflected the milliner, "I'd slap any man's face, gentleman or no, who dared to look at me like that!"

Colonel Endacott, biting his full under lip, and blackly scowling, seemed very much of this opinion; but the Mad Brat extended both hands:

"Sir Jasper!—well met! 'Tis a vast of pleasure for me to greet an old friend. Why, here am I, on my road to London—pray, Colonel Endacott, do you know Sir Jasper Standish? Gentlemen, let me introduce you: Colonel Endacott—Sir Jasper Standish. Hearing that I was about to post to London, Colonel Endacott kindly offered me a seat in his curricle. My husband's Colonel, Sir Jasper. The wife of a poor Lieutenant, it was no offer to decline! Colonel Endacott, who is really all condescension and good nature, Sir Jasper, had further been so obliging as to offer me his escort for the whole way. But the mischief is in it, we must part at the first stage! Colonel Endacott will have it he must lie at Blandford, and I am equally determined to push on!"

Colonel Endacott ground his high-booted foot on the flags of the hall, as though he would pulverise the volatile lady who was so obviously making a mock of him.

"Why, my dear Lady Selina," cried Sir Jasper, in a rich voice of victory, "let me then be your escort! Fie, fie, you cannot think of travelling alone with a mere post-boy for protection, and the roads so unsafe. I could not think of allowing it! So old a friend as I am may surely be permitted the privilege, the honour, the duty——"

"Pray, sir," interrupted Colonel Endacott, his tones were husky with rage, "you misunderstand, I think. Lady Selina Simpson is under my protection. It was entirely for her sake——" Here he cast a glance of mingled ardour and fury upon the Mad Brat who tossed

her head till her ringlets danced and hunched a shoulder on him in its military cloak, with a taunting glance. "'Twas but for her sake," the harsh accents grew raucous, "that I suggested the night's rest here. Lady Selina knows that she had but to speak the word, and I am ready——"

"Ah, not at all!—*pas du tout!*" cried Lady Selina, who had a French mother and certain inherited French ways that added not a little to her provoking charm. "*M. le Colonel* has made such big eyes at me I am positively frightened of him! And my dear mamma—do you know Sir Jasper, my dear widowed mother is at Wimbledon, and I have half a mind to go see her there—Mamma would be desolated if I were to travel under the escort of a gentleman who is not my husband. Since my Frederick is so tied up in his military duty—yes, you cruel man, you saw to that! But with Sir Jasper, Mamma knows Sir Jasper so well! Pray Mistress Landlady, bring me to a chamber where I can wash the dust off my face. 'Tis vile travelling in an open curricle. And you, Mr. Landlord, what of that parlour and that broth? How would it be, Sir Jasper, if you were to join me over this slight refection? We could discuss the journey."

Sir Jasper drew a long breath through dilated nostrils, and bowed, the corners of his lips tilting upwards in a smile of immense complacency. The landlady, who had been staring at the young Madam with amazement and disapproval, majestically led the way up the narrow stairs, expressing by a tremulous shake of her lace-capped head, and an occasional loud sniff, that such manners and customs were not to be encouraged on her premises.

Pamela Pounce saw the look which Colonel Endacott cast at the fatuously smirking Sir Jasper.

"There will be swords drawn over this, before my Lady Selina has had time to dry that dusty face of hers!" she thought. "And dear, to goodness, I have it in my heart to hope it may be Sir Jasper, for if not, it is out of

the frying-pan into the fire with her, imp of mischief as she is ! "

Out of the frying-pan into the fire it was. Colonel Endacott and Sir Jasper strolled, to all appearance, very amicably together through the meadow gate, in the direction of a certain hazel copse by the river side. In a very short time, Sir Jasper reappeared, alone ; and, strolling back into the stable-yard of the Crown, directed, with the most genteel coolness, that a couple of ostlers should take a wheelbarrow and a chair, or maybe a hurdle, and carry in his friend, who had had an accident to his leg, and would be found, incapacitated, just beside yonder little copse. It was not a matter of the least consequence, he assured them—a mere sprain, a scratch, or something of the sort.

The ostlers grinned. He cast a gold piece among them and passed on, treading jauntily, in quest of the parlour.

Miss Pounce, eating bread and butter and cold meats, to a modest bowl of milk in the window seat of the now nearly deserted coffee-room, saw the gallant gentleman's return, and understood.

" 'Tis the devil and all," she thought, " that my Lord Kilcroney is so free with his bottle ; he might be of use here. If my Lady Selina thinks she can fling off Sir Jasper as easy as she has her Colonel, she is mighty mistaken. Such a chance doesn't come a woman's way twice ! Silly child, and him with an old score to pay off—and their starting off by night and all—why, what ails the creature, to be up to such cantrips ? " thought Pamela.

She bit into her bread and butter, and then flung the slice away from her. " Well, drunk or sober, my Lord will be better than nobody."

Upon this decision Pamela shook the crumbs from her skirt, set a hand on each hip, and holding her white chin very high in the air, made a bee line for the snuggery whence loud sounds of mirth proclaimed the presence of convivial company.

Here she found my Lord, with a long clay pipe in one

hand, and cool tankard in the other, hilariously setting the tune to a roaring chorus consisting of a lumpish young squire, a land surveyor and the local doctor. My Lord was more than exhilarated, as Pamela saw at the first glance. He went on melodiously chanting and beating time, while the others, staring at the handsome girl, fell dumb, and young Squire Pitt, all one purple blush, began bashfully to draw himself out of his chair.

"My Lord—my Lord Kilcroney!" began Pamela with an unwonted sense of discomfiture, "I crave a word apart with your Lordship."

But before she could make her voice heard, she was unceremoniously thrust aside by Mr. Landlord himself.

"And, craving *your* pardon," he chided, "this is no place for young gals. Doctor Dawson, sir, you're wanted."

A dark man in a scratch wig, with a long bony face, and a restless protruding jaw, jumped up from his corner, and came forward.

"What's happened?" quoth he, feeling about his pockets with big knuckly hands that made Pamela shudder.

"Why, will you step outside, sir. Gentleman hurt through the leg."

"Odds my bones, I've left it at home. You'll have to send little Jimmy for my instrument-case. What's happened, I say?"

The landlord wagged his head slily, pinching his lips together, and made a thrusting gesture with his right forefinger; then he tapped the same finger on the side of his rubicund nose.

The doctor gave a short laugh; and, with a not altogether steady step, suffered himself to be led down the passage.

Lord Kilcroney imitated the double gesture with his pipe-stem and sprang to his feet.

"Now, glory be to God," said he, "if I had known there was such a diversion on hand——" Here he

seemed suddenly to become aware that Miss Pounce's presence in the snuggery portended something distinctly unusual. As he stared at her with a flicker of returning acuteness in his amiable eye, she seized the opportunity.

" For God's sake, my Lord, give me a moment apart."

He lurched towards her, and she seized him by the lapel of his coat ; again he looked at her ; caught perhaps something of the urgency of her spirit, and said, in altered tones :

" Wait a minute, me girl, I'll just drain the tankard to steady my head ; and I am with you."

She got him as far as the window seat in the coffee-room ; and then, casting a glance without, exclaimed :

" See for yourself. Turn your eye yonder, and see for yourself."

Lord Kilcroney flung a bewildered gaze in the direction of her pointed finger ; opened his mouth, closed it again and wiped his forehead.

" Jasper ! Jasper Standish and a lady, as I live ! What the dev——"

" Don't you know the lady, my Lord ? See now, see now, with the lamplight on her face. She is getting into the chaise. Don't you recognise Lady Selina Simpson ? "

" Se—Selina Simpson ! " echoed he with a fine tipsy sibilence. He let himself fall on the window seat, and gripped his head in both hands. " S—Selina ? "

" The Mad Brat, my Lord ! Good God, we are too late, the chaise is driving away ! This will be fine hearing for my Lady Verney, and for your lady's own dear friend, Lady Nan ! "

Lord Kilcroney dropped his hands and sat, with protruding eyeballs, staring at Pamela. Then his waistcoat was shaken with a rumbling laugh ; and he made an uncertain poke with his forefinger.

" And, is it poor Simpson, then, that's in the claws of that old red raven of a doctor this minute ? And my Lady off with Jasper ? D'ye know, it's a monstrous joke ! Oh, Gad—Jasper was her first love ! "

Pamela flung a single searching look upon him. He was muttering to himself, and laughing, winking, and shaking his head, the picture of affable inebriety.

" My Lord, my Lord, you must pull yourself together ! Lady Selina is not twenty yet. And him such a bold, bad man, as indeed you know, my Lord. 'Tis ruin, 'tis disgrace, for her, and that poor innocent lad, her husband !

" By the powers ! " Kilcròney staggered to his feet. " Jasper's a scoundrel ! I'll not have it ! What, Nan Day's little sister, mere child—monstrous ! Get me a wet napkin, girl."

He plucked his wig from his head as he spoke, and looked, Pamela thought, singularly boyish with his close-cropped red poll exposed to view. Even as she hurried out to summon the drawer, a brilliant idea struck her.

Colonel Endacott's curricle, and a fresh horse ! With anything of a roadster, so light a vehicle should easily overtake the post chaise. 'Twas a plan of retributive justice which pleased Miss Pounce hugely.

What woman wills, God wills, is an adage invented by some sycophantic admirer of the fair sex. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the world is apt to give way before any one with determined purpose, and, if this any one happens to be young, handsome, and a woman, the odds are overwhelmingly in her favour. Pamela ordered, cajoled, reasoned, implored, bustled, taunted and threatened. She made lavish, yet judicious, use of her Weymouth earnings ; and before the half-hour was out, found herself, high-perched by the side of my Lord (a strange figure, with the wet napkin still tied round his head), driving—as the group of ostlers who watched him depart unanimously declared with much admiration—like hell.

It was one of those summer nights when scarce a leaf stirs ; there was not a cloud upon the sky which stretched a wonderful amethyst blue, deepening to sapphire at the zenith, and paling into translucent primrose to the west, where the last traces of the afterglow still lingered. There would be a fine moon presently, had been the

landlord's parting words, as he respectfully deposited his Lordship's wig, hat and pistol case in the curricle. The streets of the sleepy little town were clatteringly left behind ; the steep hill surmounted ; and then the Salisbury road lay before them, straight and white across the grey mystery of the downs.

Pamela thought it was the strangest night vision she had ever beheld. The earth seemed as featureless as the sky ; the winds, which had slept in the valley, were lively enough here, as if the earth were their playground. There was a wonderful harvest smell, warm and wholesome, of ripening apples and full corn-fields, in the air—a great, mellow, sweet aroma from the fertile fields and farms that lay below the down lands.

Pamela was not romantic, yet she could not but feel that it was " as good as play-acting " to be hurled through the summer night across this vast peaceful loneliness, by this same mad, kind, fantastic Irish lord whose odd adventures were always the talk of the town.

" A stern chase is a long chase," observed the nobleman, dexterously tipping the flanks of the big bay.

The horse bounded, and the curricle rocked ; and Pamela choked a scream. Over the crest of the down a huge red moon began to show her face, swimming in a curious misty incandescence. She sucked in her breath, and her heart stirred sentimentally. If only the man of her choice had been sitting beside her, how vastly she would have enjoyed herself !

They swung through the shadows of a copse and out into the open again. My Lord cast his napkin into the road ; he begged Pamela to lend him a hand with his wig. The black horse had fallen to a foot pace up the steep incline, and my Lord, with returning sobriety, began apparently to consider the kind of undertaking into which he had plunged, and how to carry it through.

" We'll not," said he, gliding into speed again with the care of the practised whip, " overhaul them much before Salisbury." Then the moonlight caught his face, showed

his quizzical smile, and the rueful questioning of his eyes, as he went on : " And what the dickens am I to say, when we do ? Split me, Miss Pounce, you've rushed me into a pretty kettle of fish ! Be jabers, what in the world is it to me all said and done, that Jasper should be off with that little lady ? "

" Oh fie, my Lord——" began Pamela warmly. But he interrupted her :

" Well, well, never fear, 'tis as good an excuse as another for a bit of fun. Faith, didn't my Lady tell me the other day, it was the regular old gentleman I was growing into ! "

He caught her absently by the waist, as he spoke, laughing as the vehicle swerved ; and Pamela found herself again wishing for the company of the dark-browed slim young gentleman to whom she had given her heart, and who—Mr. Jocelyn had such sensibility—would have understood the really grave nature of this seemingly mad quest.

It was after two hours' steady chase, even as the road dipped from the downs into the valley, back again into the corn-fields—these had a marvellous silver and amber glow in the moonlight—that they saw, half a furlong away, the black bulk of a moving vehicle, and heard the double clatter of leisurely trotting horses.

" 'Tis but another farm waggon," quoth my Lord.

" Nay," cried Pamela, " for I see the bobbing of the post-boy, plain as plain."

" Do you, indeed, my dear ? " cried my Lord in exhilarated accents, handling the reins with a zest that sent the horse forward with a great impetus. " You haven't dathered your sight with the Crown's noted treble ale. Well, if this isn't the fun of the world ! I've stopped a coach before, my dear—that in your ear—but split me, never from a curricle, with a monstrous fine girl beside me ! "

" I'm a farmer's daughter," she said resolutely, " and

can manage a horse with anyone. So I can take the reins, my Lord, when you want your hands free."

"'Pon me sowl!" ejaculated Kilcroney admiringly. But he proceeded no further, for the black horse, gathering speed, and excited by the clatter of rival hoofs, made a dash forward, and my Lord, with voice and cracking lash, encouraged the canter to a gallop.

The post-boy started from his jogging trance, looked over his shoulder and hastily pulled to one side. The curricle went by at a flash; my Lord never slackened speed till they had reached the bottom of the hill and a bit beyond.

"Now," said Kilcroney, as he manœuvred the curricle right across the road, "now for the fun of the fair! Just put your lovely hand under the seat and see if you can lay a hould of me pistols."

(My Lord's brogue became agreeably marked in moments of emotion.)

The black horse was dancing from hoof to hoof; the curricle swayed rhythmically to his capers, and Pamela felt, when her companion plucked the pistols from the case she held open, as if every fibre of her being were dancing in unison; exhilaration, a sense of splendid adventure, a spice of fear, and a delightful recklessness had hold of her. She almost understood now how the "Mad Brat" could fling everything to the winds for the mere taste of such a moment. Lord Kilcroney thrust the reins into her hands, leaped lightly from his perch; and he, too, seemed to dance in the moonlight as he advanced towards the chaisé.

The post-boy had prudently pulled up at sight of the obstacle in the road; now, as the pistol barrels glinted in the moonlight, he raised a dismal shout, and dived sideways off the fat grey haunches of his mount. The landlord of the Crown had provided a stalwart plodding pair for Lady Selina's post-chaise; and these were content enough to draw breath, craning their necks, snorting comfortably down their nostrils, and shuddering in turn till the harness rattled.

"How now!" cried an angry voice from the chaise, and Sir Jasper's head emerged into the moonlight. "What's the matter? rascal, scamp! Hallo, stap me!" This in quite another tone. "Why, the devil—'tis a highwayman, a footpad!"

Kilcroney, who had planted himself sideways, with face concealed by his extended arm, chaunted in the most musical tones he could muster:

"Stand and deliver!" Then, breaking into laughter, he disclosed his countenance, with a fine flourish of his mantons; "Stand and deliver," he repeated. "Jasper, stand and deliver your stolen goods!"

There was a faint cry within the chaise, altogether lost in the round volley of oaths from Sir Jasper. He consigned Kilcroney's soul to perdition, and his body to corruption, with explicitness and repetition, and commanded the post-boy to remount and carry on, if he did not wish to be flayed alive. But the sagacious youth was apparently swallowed in the darkness.

Presently Kilcroney's shouts of laughter were echoed in silver titters both from the chaise and the curricle. These sounds goaded the baronet to madness. "Poor Jasper!" (Kilcroney afterwards related) "He was foaming like a tankard of porter, and was almost as black in the face, by Jingo, when he lepped from the chaise and at me. Troth, he had his sword out, and sure the next moment he would have let the moonlight through me, hadn't my little lady in the chaise caught him by the skirts of his coat! It was the grand slap he came on the flint of the road—aye, and the grand escape I had of it intirely! 'Up with you, me boy, and we'll have it out like gentlemen,' cries I, and by the time he got up again I was ready for him, as pretty as Angelo, with the barkers back in my pocket and my little bodkin taking the air in my hand."

It was not the first time that my Lord Kilcroney and Sir Jasper had crossed blades. Indeed, Kilcroney's mercurial temperament, and Sir Jasper's inflammably

jealous one, had come into collision more than once. In the last encounter the Irishman had had the worst of it; but to-night, whatever disability the day's potations might have caused him was more than counter-balanced by the blind rage which possessed the baronet as he fell to his guard.

Perhaps Sir Jasper had been already in none too good a temper when the novel highwayman had arrested him in the full course of elopement, certainly the countenance with which his Helen watched the encounter from the chaise window displayed more entertainment than anxiety. In fact, when Sir Jasper, receiving a neat thrust through his sword arm, fell back with a curse and a groan, it was Pamela who cried out in alarm, while Lady Selina shrilly laughed and clapped her hands.

An odd little procession towards midnight roused the slumbers of the Mitre Inn at Salisbury, with peremptory summons. Two ladies in a post-chaise, escorted by two gentlemen in a curricle. The ladies seemed to be in high dudgeon with each other. The gentlemen very friendly. Indeed, the younger and better-looking of the two (though both were personable men) was distinctly assiduous in his attention to the other, who had (as the landlord was duly informed) met with a nasty accident through the overturning of the curricle at a sharp corner, which robbed him of the use of his right arm.

The post-boy had a curious tale to tell over a restoring mug of ale. But so scared and bewildered did he appear; so monstrous a jumble did he make of highwaymen and duels, that the landlord, who was a sensible man, diagnosed pure coward's flim-flams, and promptly dismissed him to his straw.

Pamela slept late. She had been allotted the dressing-room of the superior bed-chamber which she had herself claimed for Lady Selina. Her last thought, as she snuggled down in the feather bed, had been: "I've got

her safe, the little fool!" and the first that bore into her consciousness in the morning was the same comforting reflection: "I've got her safe."

Angry words had passed between the two women in the chaise last night. Though Pamela had been unable to make head or tail of the arguments produced by the "Mad Brat" to justify her conduct, every word had revealed a childish inconsequence.

"One would say," thought the milliner, as she lay, reflecting on her impressions, "that the silly chit had laid some wager, or was pretending to be wicked for the mere show off of the thing. For, if ever I saw a gentleman set down, it was Sir Jasper last night! In my opinion he was mortal glad to be out of it at the price. Never saw him so loving with my Lord! And, as for her, she looked at him like a wild cat, as she passed him by, on the way to her room."

Pamela sat on the edge of her bed, yawned, and gazed at the door which separated her from Lady Selina's apartment, congratulating herself that, so old-fashioned was the hostelry, there was no other issue. But, as she looked, the smile faded from her face. The door was not quite closed! She remembered very well how my Lady Selina had banged and bolted it last night, intimating thereby, better than by any speech, what she thought of the intrusive proximity of the milliner.

"It's not possible——!" On the spur of suspicion, Pamela was out of bed and into the next room at a spring. Sunshine was pouring in between the open shutters; the great four-post bed was empty. There was no trace of the fair delinquent, save a long gauntletted glove on the floor.

"Well, of all—of all the minxes!" Miss Pounce pivoted on herself. "Pamela, my girl, you're fooled! And you such a light sleeper, to think you should have slept so deep and let the bird fly!"

She ran back to her own room and, after ringing the bell violently, proceeded like a hurricane to her toilet.

Cold water and yellow soap were good enough for her any day. The service at the Mitre seemed scarce like to add to its reputation. Miss Pounce was well advanced, indeed she had reached the stage of buttoning her trim figure into the grey riding coat, before the repeated attacks on the bell-pull produced a panting housemaid.

"Oh, please, Miss," began this damsel volubly, "was you ringing? I was kept by the gentlemen in Blue Parrot, helping the gentleman to bind the other gentleman's arm, what hurt himself. And that there post-boy was not so far out, for if ever I see a sword cut——"

Pamela interrupted with an ejaculation of relief.

"Sir Jasper is still in the inn, then? And my Lord, too?"

"Aye, Miss——"

"And the lady?"

"The lady's been gone this hour, Miss. Oh, aye, she went off with the other gentleman——"

"What——?" shrieked Pamela.

"Oh, aye, Miss! The handsome, dark gentleman what travelled all the way from London to meet her. Last night, when he came riding in, missis and all of us agreed, we never saw a handsomer gentleman. 'I expect,' says he, 'a lady by coach from Weymouth.'" She stopped to stare: "Be'n't you well, Miss?"

Pamela had fallen into a chair. A cold and pricking fear had laid hold of her. There are premonitions of the heart which out-leap any perception of the wits.

"His name, his name!" she gasped.

"Lud, now!" The girl clacked her tongue. "I did hear her call him——"

"Stay!" cried Pamela. "Was it Bellairs?"

"Lud, Miss," cried the girl, "however did you know?"

"Because," said Miss Pounce sternly, "I am the lady he came to meet."

With the same deadly composure she ordered a post chaise, and started once again in pursuit. This time she

would have no man's help. She would go alone. "What business is it of yours?" had cried Lady Selina insolently, last night. And she had answered: "It's every true woman's business to keep another straight if she can." But now, here was no altruistic interference; here love and life were at stake for her. Here was her own business and nobody else's, with a vengeance!

Gone this hour! Well, she would overtake them at Basingstoke, where they must halt of a certainty.

Pamela had had, in a little purse apart, twenty golden guineas, her own profit in the successful week's transactions in modes at Weymouth. She had meant to add them to the comfortable nest of savings which were to facilitate her marriage with her charming spendthrift. Now the shining company in the green silk meshes had already notably dwindled; and at every five miles or so, Pamela would draw forth a coin and, thrusting her pretty head out of the window, would hail the post-boy and hold it up to his sight.

"Another goldfinch for you, my lad, if you mend your speed!"

By the time they reached Basingstoke there were four sovereigns for the youth; and if he was sweating, it was nothing to which the horses were doing. They dripped and trembled and steamed, foam-flecked from mane to tail. Pamela's green purse was considerably lighter; but it had been worth it. The fat dappled greys which had trotted off with my Lady Selina and Mr. Bellairs that morning were even now being led out of the shafts. A comfortable trot they had come at, to judge by their untroubled appearance.

"Yes, Miss," said the formidable-looking landlady who ruled at the Angel, Basingstoke, and who, no doubt, found a distinct growth of beard and a bass voice as useful to her if not more than the support of any man. "A lady and a gentleman are partaking of refreshment in the parlour. And what might you be wanting with them?"

Her eye, small and fierce as a wild boar's, appraised the new guest up and down.

Pamela saw that travelling alone she was suspect; she had an inspiration.

"I am Lady Selina's own woman," she said pertly. "Her Ladyship expects me. Kindly direct me."

She had seen too many lady's maids not to be able to play the part: she was now the fashionable Abigail to the life—plausible, supple, sure of herself; her gaze was challenging; her air deferential, yet on the verge of insolence.

The bearded landlady shrugged her shoulders, and told the drawer to bring Miss into Britannia.

"You needn't knock, young man, I will announce myself," said Pamela. She tapped discreetly with her nails on the panel just beneath the figure with the trident; then, without waiting for a reply, opened the door.

In one swift glance she took in the scene: the Mad Brat did not seem to be getting on any better with Mr. Bellairs than she had with either her Colonel or her Baronet. She was seated, her elbows on the table, her chin in her hand. With frowning brows, a fixed and angry stare, flushed cheeks and pouting lips, she was the image of "Beauty in a rage." Mr. Bellairs was pacing the room with his hands behind his back; and he, too, the very incarnation of bad temper.

The milliner did not give herself time to reflect whether the obvious tension betokened good or evil for her. She had to act.

"If you please, my Lady," she said, advancing as if she had been indeed what she represented herself, "you have forgotten your glove."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Bellairs. "Pamela!"

He wheeled in his walk to turn upon the newcomer a countenance marked with the oddest mixture of discomfiture, amusement and wrath.

Lady Selina merely cast a glance from the glove which Pamela laid before her to the girl's face, and lifted her

eyebrows. She had passed from anger to insolence. Pamela itched to box her ears.

"I assure you, my dear," protested Mr. Bellairs in an ill-assured voice, "that *I* have forgotten nothing."

Pamela understood well enough the intention of the speech; she smiled scornfully. And when Lady Selina, just rolling her eyes in his direction, dropped the words: "Except your manners, sir," she felt certain the rebuke had been well deserved.

Indeed, now that she came to look at him more closely, she saw a red patch on the olive of his cheek, and guessed the offence which had called for such a buffet. Oh! she knew the ways of men; and, to her philosophy, the gentleman who, thrust into such a position as Mr. Bellairs, should have failed to take advantage of it, would have been little less than a milksop. Nevertheless, there had been defection. It was her, Pamela, whom he had come to meet—Pamela his affianced, to whom, because of the very difference in their stations, he owed more delicacy of attention than if she had been his equal. And he had let himself be whisked away by the first wanton who lifted a beckoning finger! Serve her right if he had kissed, and serve him right if she had slapped! Oh, she knew the ways of men! But—the ways of the Mad Brat was still enigma to her. What was this piece of mischief about? As if to answer the perplexed thought, Lady Selina suddenly spoke:

"'Tis positive sickening to think that there is not a gentleman of the lot who would give a lady his protection as far as Town, without thrusting his odious attentions on her!"

"But my dear, good creature——"

"I'm not your dear, good creature, sir!" Lady Selina sprang to her feet and burst into a sudden passion of tears. "Was ever anyone," she cried, "so plagued, so persecuted, so distracted, so unhappy, so—so abandoned?"

Pamela again felt an overwhelming conviction that

here was one merely as naughty and as innocent as a child.

"Oh, my dear!" she exclaimed, and caught her forcibly into her own strong warm arms. There was more than a touch of the mother in Pamela; she never could bear to leave suffering uncomforted. "Why, in the name of God, did you leave your own husband?"

The Mad Brat screamed as if the last word had been a blow.

"Oh, oh, my Fred!"

Pamela cast a look over the bride's heaving shoulder at Mr. Bellairs.

"There, sir!" she said severely, "there's for you and your vanity! For you, and the others, who are so ready to think that any lady who so much as smiles on you is mad in love with you—and all the while you're but the catspaw of her jealousy!"

"Pamela!" cried Jocelyn Bellairs. He had been standing, very ill at ease, struggling with the variety of his emotions. He now broke into laughter which had yet something of wrath in it. "I've been a confounded fool! And I swear you are an angel! Oh, confusion! I can't bear to hear a woman cry. But I must say Joseph himself would have been tempted by that little—devil, this morning!"

"Hush!" cried the milliner, rocking the weeping Selina as if it had been a baby, but shooting another glance at Mr. Bellairs which, after all, held more indulgence than resentment. "Hush, sir! Leave me with her Ladyship. Go, refresh yourself with a tankard of cool ale, after your dusty drive—and send the landlady hither with the hartshorn."

If Mr. Bellairs had thought highly of Pamela before, he now told himself she was the pattern of true women. He paused but to kiss the firm, capable, white hand she extended to him, and then hastily closed the door between himself and those distressing vapours.

"Now, my dear," coaxed Pamela, "I see how it is.

You've had a quarrel with that elegant young officer of yours. You've had a quarrel, and you went off in a huff with that dark, bad old Colonel——"

Lady Selina shuddered, and stamped her foot; and inarticulately declared that if she'd had a dagger to her hand, she'd have stabbed him.

"Well, Sir Jasper's done it for you, very neat, in the leg."

Selina interrupted with another scream.

"Sir Jasper? Why, he was worse! Oh, how glad I was to see My Lord Kilcroney run him through!"

"I'm sure," said Pamela, a little dryly, "it is a mercy, my Lady, I came alone after you and Mr. Bellairs! Mr. Bellairs is engaged to me, my Lady, and I don't seem to fancy a hole in him."

Lady Selina was much too absorbed in her own grief to have a thought to spare for any such trifles. She fell again into her chair, cast her arms upon the table and buried her face on them, wailing, in an extravagance of despair, that her Fred would never forgive her, and that there was nothing left for her but death.

"Why, there's no harm done," Pamela briskly consoled. "I'm ready to vouch for you that you've travelled with me, and slept with me——" she broke off. Her quick ear had caught the sound of certain well-known accents in the courtyard without.

"Glory be to God," my Lord was saying, in his richest brogue. "Will anyone catch me that young gentleman by the leg? He's not safe to be loose. Trip him up, I tell you, or there'll be murder done! Come back, Simpson, you *omadhaun!*"

Pamela made a spring for the door; she had said that she would not have a hole made in her Jocelyn: heaven knew what catastrophe might not ensue were she not on the spot to prevent mischief with Bellairs, apt as tinder, and this young Simpson in his fury! She went like the wind down the passage, and across the bar, towards that spot in the courtyard whence arose sounds of struggle and fierce objurgation.

She found a slim young gentleman in uniform locked in the embrace of Lord Kilcroney. My Lord was laughing so considerably that it threatened to invalidate his grip. The young officer's countenance shocked Pamela, so disfigured was it by rage and jealousy.

Even as she approached he wrenched himself free, and, leaping forward, all but knocked her down in his blind rush. Pamela's body, however, was as well-balanced as her mind; she propped herself against the Inn porch and caught the outraged young husband vigorously by the arm. It was her words which really arrested him.

"You are looking for Lady Selina, Mr. Simpson, sir; for your wife? She is waiting for you in the parlour."

He stared at her, his lips moving, his eyes starting, his whole begrimed, unshorn, exhausted countenance stamped with a wildness of despair.

"Yes, sir." Pamela slipped her firm clasp down to his shaky, ice-cold hand; her voice was as soothing as her touch: "Yes, sir, her Ladyship and I we came here together. Her Ladyship was good enough to accept my services on the road. I'm travelling back to business from Weymouth, it fitted in nicely. And Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, coming to meet me at Salisbury—he and I being an engaged couple, if you will forgive my being so personal—that fitted in very nicely too, for he escorted us. Your lady's very young to be travelling alone, sir——"

Pamela knew that there is no better defence for the guilty than to reproach the innocent.

"There now, me boy," cried Kilcroney, taking up the cue, "didn't I tell you it was the wrong scent you were after, altogether? Hadn't ye me word for it that Colonel Endacott and Jasper had fixed up that little meeting at Blandford ever since the night of my Lady Kilcroney's rout at Weymouth? And sure, when my Lady Selina walked into the Crown Inn, wasn't Miss Pounce behind her? Miss Pounce will swear to that. And I'll lay you me oath that she's speaking truth, since it's the one coach load of it we all were."

But whether or no these assurances and plausibilities might have proved convincing to the inflamed brain of the injured husband, they were doomed to failure by the action of the Mad Brat herself.

This impetuous young woman suddenly hurled herself into their midst and upon her husband's breast, tears, kisses, passionate confession pouring from her.

"Oh, Fred, Fred, darling! Oh, my own and only love—I tried to run away from you, and I couldn't! Fred, my angel, it was all that cruel thing—that cruel thing you said. Oh, Fred, you do remember?" She shook him. "You know you said that you did not think any other man would be such a f-f-fool—Yes, you did—you said no other man would be such a f-fool as to run away with me!"

My Lord Kilcroney, with his Lady and the other friends interested in the erratic young couple, were all agreed that the Mad Brat was well matched in her spouse. For of all the hot-headed, light-witted, frantic fellows—these were my Lord's own words—he had ever had to deal with, Lieutenant Fred Simpson, of the Marines, was the "jewel of the lot!" The united efforts of himself, Squire Day, and Lord Verney, were ultimately successful, however, in preventing the series of duels which Master Fred at first seemed bent on bringing about. Even Lord Kilcroney did not escape a challenge; but on his representing his services on the Salisbury Road, the affair had to end in a laugh. Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs, on Pamela's prompting, made a very frank and full apology, couched in language so admirably chosen, that even the young Othello had to be satisfied with it.

"I confess," he said, "that I was led away, Mr. Simpson. I confess that I lost my head (and very nearly my heart). But ask yourself whether, in such company, an angel from heaven might not have succumbed!"

Providence itself intervened in the matter of Colonel Endacott, for this gentleman's wound, whether owing to

original distemper in the blood, or to the ministrations of Doctor Dawson, became so inflamed that it was held as more than doubtful whether that gallant officer would ever walk again. He was invalided out of the regiment, thereby providing at least one step for Mr. Simpson.

There only remained Sir Jasper—no easy personage to deal with, as my Lord knew from long experience. But by the time the baronet's sword arm had healed an excellent post abroad had been obtained for Mr. Simpson; and to the infinite relief of all her relations, the Mad Brat and her spouse carried their bickerings and reconciliations to another clime.

CHAPTER XVI

In which my Lady Kilcroney has the Last Word

The best-tempered of women are apt to be a trifle peevish after a wedding, especially if they are responsible for the event, and have had most of the trouble of the bridal preparations.

My Lady Kilcroney had had two reasons for patronising the marriage between Mr. Jocelyn Bellairs and Miss Pamela Pounce.

In the first place she flattered herself that she had made it. It pleased her sense of rectitude to know that it was an heroic decision. Jocelyn, the rascal, had gone too far, and Pamela was a first-class good girl. 'Twas but justice.

Then my Lady Kilcroney was a woman of the world, to her finger-tips. The alliance, which she could not have prevented if she would, was a strange, foolish, unequal business. To silence ill-natured gossip and the malicious tattle of dear, intimate enemies, there was nothing for it but for her to take a firm stand of championship. 'Twas the only attitude to ensure respect, from Royalty downwards. To tell the truth, Kitty was getting a bit sick of Royalty, and would not have cared had she followed my Lady Flo's example, but not upon this crisis. She knew how to take the Queen by this time, not being a born fool, and, indeed, had emerged more triumphantly than ever from a situation which might have lost her her place at Court.

"I thought of you, ma'am," she had said, turning up

her eyes, "how you would have wished me to act, you that sets virtue before everything."

If the Queen had gathered a lower opinion of Pamela Pounce's moral stamina from the interview than was justified by facts, she had gained a vastly higher one of my Lady Kilcroney's. So the incident was closed to Kitty's advantage.

And now Pamela was wed, and my Lady Kilcroney had made quite a droll, pretty feast of it.

Farmer Pounce, in blue cloth and brass buttons, Mrs. Pounce, in a lovely new bonnet trimmed for the occasion by her daughter, followed by a rosy progeny, had been really such honest, simple dears that Kitty quite loved them; and Pamela (sensible, excellent creature that she was, who had chosen to be married in a snowy muslin and a white chip), had looked so sweet and wholesome and happy, and withal remained so respectfully in her place, was so pleasantly unassuming, that my Lady very genuinely considered old Bellairs's nephew to be more lucky than he deserved.

She had convened her special circle to witness the ceremony, which was performed in her own drawing-room at Hertford Street; not omitting Mistress Lafone, for Kitty would not put it into the minx's power to say that she was afraid of her tongue.

There was a brisk passage between these two ladies, out of which Kitty, she flattered herself, emerged victorious.

"Dear, to be sure," had said Molly, with her most tart-sweet air, "how monstrous strange it will be to be ordering hats from your own niece, my Lady Kilcroney!"

And my Lady had responded: she trusted to Heaven that Pamela would be more particular than ever, now, whom she served.

Madame Mirabel had had the good sense to excuse herself on the ground of age and infirmity; a piece of tact which, coupled with the handsome present she bestowed

on her esteemed partner, was as clever a stroke of business as the astute old lady had ever contrived.

Miss Clara Smithson and Miss Polly Popple, on the other hand, who were, as the whole of the Bond Street establishment knew, that devoted to their dear, darling Miss Pounce that they were as glad of her happiness in the depths of their feeling hearts as if it had been their own, could not, of course, be omitted from the list of guests; and indeed, it may be said that Lydia's only consolation on a day, which was otherwise unmitigatedly displeasing to her, was the opportunity which the presence of these females gave her of discharging her bosom of some of its accumulated gall.

When all her company had departed, my Lady owned that she was tired, and Lydia was very plainly given to understand that she must not presume upon a relationship, which was, to say the least of it, ridiculous.

Lydia had made herself far finer than the bride, and Kitty thought it prodigious bad taste in her to be so ruffled and flounced and panniered.

"And the shade of lavender you've chosen, Lydia, positive sets my teeth on edge, and I should have thought you'd have known better than to rouge yourself up, till any one would take my own woman for an actress, and a low one at that."

"Well, then, I'm sure, your Ladyship," retorted Lydia with spirit, "not having any acquaintance with such females, save your Ladyship's own dear friend, my Lady Mandeville (who would have looked better for a bit of colour to-day), it wouldn't become me to set myself up against your Ladyship's opinion in the matter; but considering the practice I've had on your Ladyship it's to be hoped I'd know how to put on the rouge, if I don't show it off as well as your Ladyship, not being so full in the face. And I'm sorry your Ladyship ain't satisfied with the hue of my gown, it being one of her own presents to me, Christmas five years that was. And indeed," went on Lydia, "I never could abide it myself, but since

it was when your Ladyship went sudden out of mourning for old Mr. Bellairs, and she didn't know what to do with the eight yards of taffety, I couldn't be so disobliging as not to make the best of them. And indeed, considering the occasion to-day I thought they fitted in uncommon apt."

"Dear, to be sure!" cried Kitty, sinking into a chair. "What a tongue you have! 'Tis to be hoped it isn't a family failing or else my poor dear Bellairs's nephew, the last of his name, will have a sad time of it."

"Dear, to be sure!" echoed Lydia, with frightful acrimony, "I could find it in my heart to pity that pore young gentleman myself. No one can ever say I wanted that there owdacious marriage." (Which was certainly true. Lydia would infinitely have preferred to see her niece bloom unplucked on her maiden stem.) "Of all the unpleasant situations, I says, him to have a wife a milliner as is born to another class, and spend his days torn, so to speak, between the high and the low. He'll never make a fine lady of Pamela, what's a work-woman in the bone, and he can't," pursued Lydia, moved by her own eloquence almost to tears, "strip his own gentility off of himself like a coat and sit as it were in his shirt-sleeves, common, for the rest of his life."

Seeing angry retort leaping in her mistress's eye, Lydia proceeded in a great hurry, to get out the next most disagreeable remark she could think of: "And as to him being the last of his name, your Ladyship can't go counting on that. Mrs. Jocelyn Bellairs," Lydia tittered, "will have a long family like her mother before her, and before we know where we are we'll have little Bellairses a-running about all over the place like spiders——"

She broke off. Intimately acquainted with her mistress as she was, there were sides to her character which Miss Lydia Pounce had as yet failed to grasp. She had thought to pay out my Lady for her odious unkindness, but her shaft had singularly missed the mark. All the ill-humour vanished from Kitty Kilcroney's charming

countenance. She clasped her hands with a genuine cry of delight.

" Why, Lydia, I'll be godmother to the first girl, I will indeed ! It ought to be a charming creature, they so handsome and so happy ! I'll be godmother, and 'twill be a vast of pleasure to me, child, to think there'll be another Kitty Bellairs ! "

THE END



Printed in Great Britain by Wyman & Sons Ltd., London, Reading and Fakenham


00076189

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 26 March, 2016